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EDITOR'S NOTE

EVERYTHING CHANGES

MATT MILLER
Editor-In-Chief

PAY CLOSE ATTENTION to the games business for long enough, and one truth becomes apparent: the major players are constantly changing. Big companies rise, fall, and rise again. Major developers close, only to have the core talent that was the heart of those teams appear again to guide another, perhaps even more successful studio. Even the dominant console makers in one year may take on a completely different role a few years later, as evidenced by the dramatically changed natures of companies like Sega or Atari.

Recent weeks saw a long-simmering drama finally conclude with Microsoft's acquisition of Activision Blizzard. It's hard even to fathom the sum of money (roughly $69 billion for those keeping score) that changed hands in the exchange; the company's purchase was so big that it attracted the attention of regulators both here in the United States and abroad, as the legal ramifications of such a noteworthy shift in the gaming business were called into question.

If it sounds like a significant platform holder acquiring the company that makes some of the most popular games in the world is a big deal, it's because it is. The recently concluded takeover is the largest video game acquisition in history, and both the industry and gamers will likely feel its effects for years. If you'd like to understand how it all happened, I'd encourage you to look at our article on p. 8 of this issue.

While some individuals will decry any company acquisition in gaming as terrible news, the reality is that there's no hard and fast rule for whether it might turn out good or bad for the end user – that's you and me. Undoubtedly, some mergers over the years have brought an influx of investment in projects and creators or new technology-sharing opportunities that push the medium forward.

But there's also good reason to be concerned. Companies like Sony opposed Microsoft's most recent big move, and it's easy to see why. Even in the brief days since the deal closed, Microsoft has been eager to tout a new generation of gaming on the horizon. But the accurate picture will likely emerge in the next few years as we watch the inevitable changes to studios, the quality of released games, and more.

I adore playing many of the franchises under the Microsoft/Xbox umbrella. That list of great series has only expanded with this deal (see p. 84 for a complete accounting). Because of that, I'll continue to cheer for the success of those developers and the games they're making. At the same time, I think it's worth watching with a critical eye to see the long-term outcome for affected game developers and gamers. In my own gaming hobby, what I see there will have a lot to do with where I spend my time and money.

Thanks for checking out the issue this month. We're all sharing in a tremendously packed stretch of fantastic game releases in one of the best years I can recall for gaming. I hope we can help enrich whatever you decide to play with *your* time and money.

Play well. Be well.

GAMEINFORMER

AVATAR: FRONTIERS OF PANDORA

Three more Avatar films may be on the way, but the next chapter begins next month in Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora. This canonical chapter unfolds on the other side of Pandora in the beautiful open world of the Western Frontier, with players controlling a Na'vi to take the fight to the RDA. New clans, wildlife, and more await, and you can learn all the details by reading the full cover story on p.42.

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STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Kyle Hilliard

Magazine Content Director

Video game movie adaptations have finally got to the point where they receive rave reviews like "It wasn't terrible!," which is exciting. However, while folks are debating *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* versus *Sonic the Hedgehog*, I can't help but feel like they're ignoring what is easily the best video game movie adaptation: *Werewolves Within*. Based on the Ubisoft franchise you've never heard of, the movie is a horror comedy starring Sam Richardson and an impressive cast of comedic actors, all playing out a murder mystery where someone is secretly a werewolf. Seek it out!

Marcus Stewart

Associate Editor

I'm having the same trouble deciding which amazing 2023 game to spend time with as I do deciding what to eat at a buffet. Is it better to load my plate with a little bit of everything or enjoy larger portions of two or three favorite dishes? Is it wise to fill another plate with new treats when I still have food left on my first one? Will I be escorted off the premises for dipping chicken wings into the chocolate fountain? Can I dip a copy of Spider-Man 2 into the chocolate fountain? I'm hungry now. Video games.

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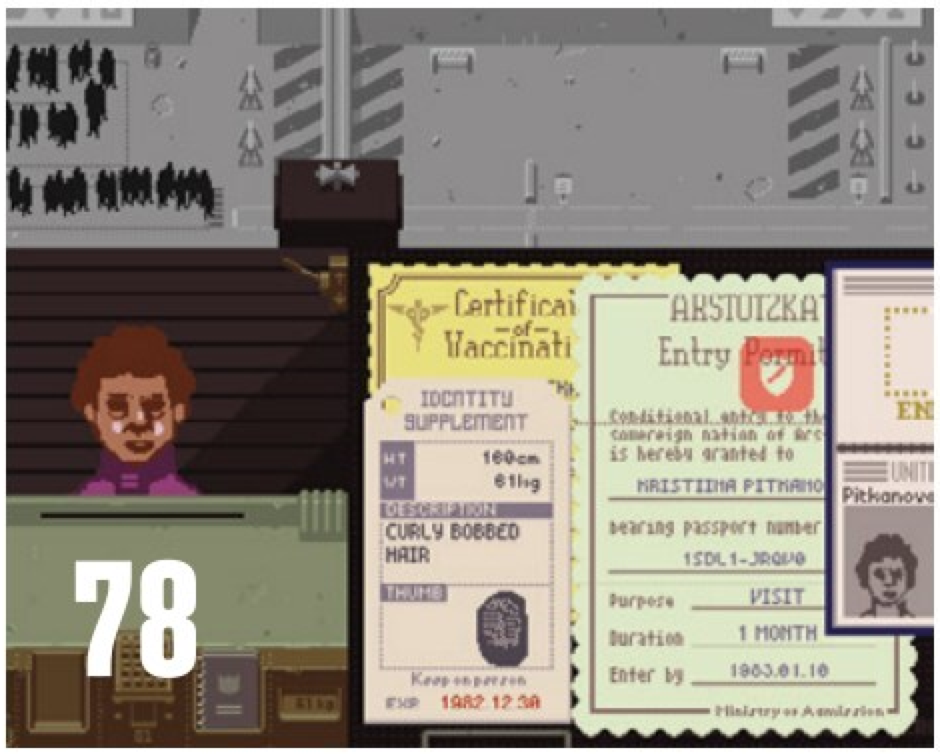

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spotlight

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We visited Massive Entertainment in Malmö, Sweden, to play Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora. Read our detailed breakdown of this new chapter in the Avatar mythos.

8 **THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF AN ACQUISITION**

Generally, corporate consolidation is bad. But inevitably, it keeps happening, and Microsoft and Xbox are two giant participants. Now that the company has completed its purchase of Activision-Blizzard, here's everything you need to know.

14 **IT'S UNDENIABLY GOING TO COST PEOPLE JOBS**

Ever the hot-button issue, AI has entered the game industry. We talked to supporters and detractors throughout the industry about what they think. As one said: "It's Undeniably Going To Cost People Jobs."

24 **ACCESSIBILITY BEYOND MENUS**

Now more than ever, developers are taking great strides towards making video games accessible to all. So, we looked at the fighting game scene, talking to disabled community members about what's going well and what still needs improvement.

78 **AN IMPENETRABLE CAGE OF BUREAUCRACY**

In an ideal world, Papers, Please creator Lucas Pope says his game would've become irrelevant almost immediately. Instead, it is more relevant than ever. We look back at 10 years of the "Dystopian Document Thriller."

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Replies

IN NEED OF SPACE

Why on Earth do game companies decide to release all their big games at the same time? If it isn't February that's stacked with games, it's October that's stacked with games. I know game devs don't do it on purpose but, couldn't they aim for the drought months to release games like summer or early fall? I don't have enough time or money for all these games. **– SnakeEater1964 via Discord**

↳ *This has been a hot topic for discussion, particularly this year with how absolutely stacked October was. The original idea behind loading up the fall months was to get the games out for holiday shoppers, while February is often one of the last chances to make a meaningful impact in the fiscal quarter. Long-term planning with associated deadlines could definitely help there, but game development is an extremely complicated, multi-year process. The developers that simply ship a game when it's done – particularly indie studios – may not have the luxury of waiting a few months for the money to start coming in. However, it could make sense for larger publishers to delay their titles until a less crowded time, but then they run the risk of upsetting players; after all, what if your most anticipated game of 2023 got pushed to June 2024 for no other reason than to give the game some space? I bet shareholders wouldn't be too happy with that, either.*

It's a delicate balance, but in principle, we're with you. A lot of the time, May through early August can feel like the dog days of summer, with few tentpole releases to look forward to. Maybe this super crowded holiday season will be a wake-up call to developers and publishers that targeting other areas of the year that might allow them to make a bigger splash upon launch, but I wouldn't count on it. The industry seems pretty set on a cycle of big early-year releases, summer hype push with Summer Game Fest and Gamescom, big holiday releases, and The Game Awards hype push before the calendar turns over.

REMADE MEMORIES

What is each editor/staff member's most desired remake? If any game could get the Demon's Souls treatment, which one? **– JHerb24 via Discord**

↳ *Matt: In the wake of Nintendo's awesome rethinking of the Mario formula in Wonder, I'd love to see them return and remake my favorite, Super Mario World, but with expanded levels and worlds fueled by the likes of Badges and Wonder Flower effects.*

↳ *Kyle: The original Metal Gear Solid. Again.*

↳ *Brian: Final Fantasy X. Keep it turn-based, but bring all the modern gameplay and presentation conventions.*

↳ *Marcus: Give me Chrono Trigger in the HD-2D style à la Octopath Traveler/Live A Live. Please and thanks.*

↳ *Wesley: Bloodborne. With no PS4 Pro support and no performance upgrades for the PS5, returning to my favorite From Software game is tough, but a remake can fix this.*

↳ *Blake: Mine is Max Payne, and I am getting it.*

↳ *Charles: Kid Icarus: Uprising! A fantastic game trapped in an awful control scheme.*

↳ *Margaret: Zelda II: The Adventure of Link is a fantastic Zelda installment, and with modern production, it could get more of the love I think it deserves.*

↳ *Laleh: SkiFree, the most terrifying game of all time.*

↳ *Kristin: Golden Sun! I spent a lot of time playing it back in the day and would love to revisit it with modern updates.*

↳ *Mónica: Yuna's character growth in Final Fantasy X-2 and the evolution of the world post-Sin deserves justice (and please don't take away the dresspheres!).*

↳ *Jon: There were whispers of a Chrono Trigger remake earlier this year and that game seems too iconic not to at least get a remaster.*

The Pulse

We asked the community what it's been playing over the last month and have compiled power rankings of the current hottest games among our readers.

1. Marvel's Spider-Man 2 **NEW RELEASE**
2. Alan Wake 2 **NEW RELEASE**
3. Super Mario Bros. Wonder **NEW RELEASE**
4. Resident Evil 4 ▲
5. Assassin's Creed Mirage **NEW RELEASE**
6. Baldur's Gate 3 ▼
7. Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 **NEW RELEASE**
8. Cyberpunk 2077: Phantom Liberty ▲
9. Sonic Superstars **NEW RELEASE**
10. Ghostrunner 2 **NEW RELEASE**

Soundoff:

We asked our readers and community to share their proudest gaming accomplishment. Here are some of their responses!

Beating Malenia first try in Elden Ring on my first playthrough while the whole internet was complaining that she was too hard. **– via Facebook**

Beating Ocarina of Time by myself when I was 7 years old. Took a few years of watching my dad play it before I was brave enough to try it alone. **– via Instagram**

I think mine would have to be a shared accomplishment. My dad and I have played through all the Halo titles together and I'd say that beating Halo 2 together on Legendary was my proudest moment. **– via Facebook**

Teaching my grandson how to play video games. **– via Twitter**

Watching my daughter beat her first game, Kena: Bridge of Spirits. Although, beating the original Dark Souls on 360 was definitely up there. **– via Discord**

A few weeks ago, I would have said Final Fantasy X Platinum on console. But now, it's the yearslong work I helped my mum put into her FarmVille game. She passed away recently, so maybe in the future, I'll go back and keep her little farm going. **– via Twitter**

↓

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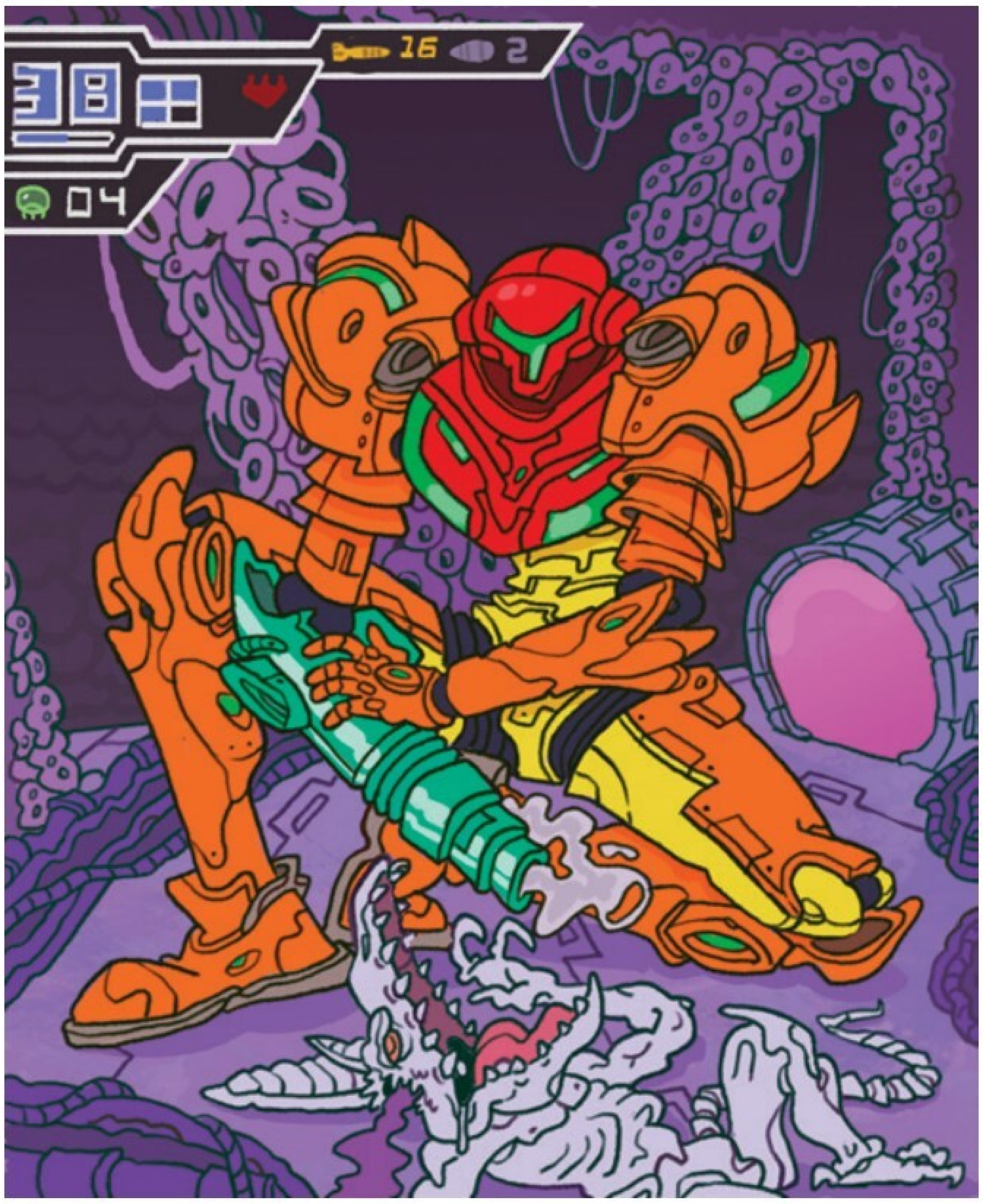
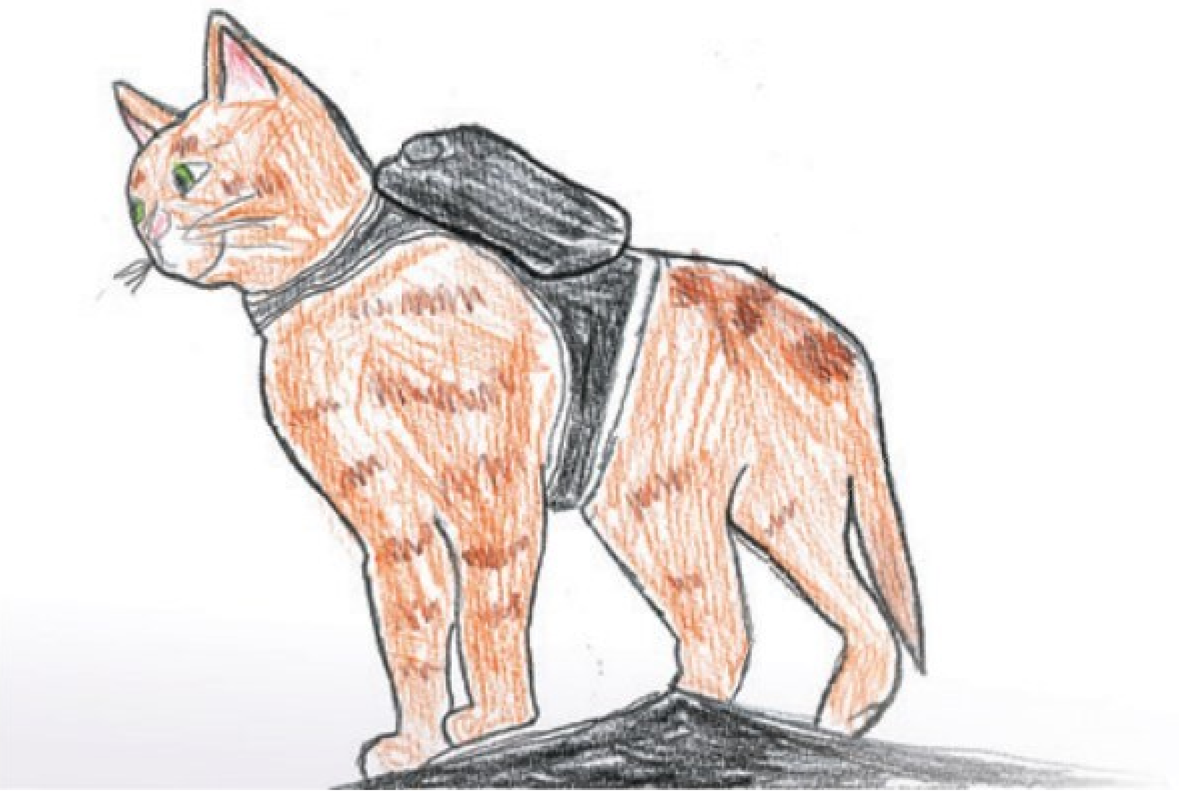
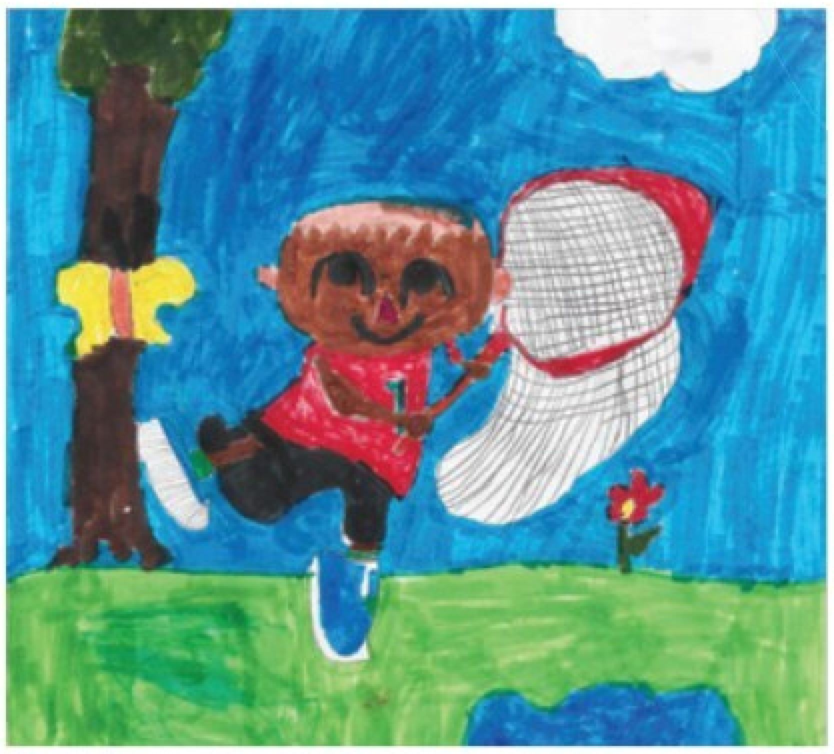


Reader art winner: Rafael Sakta



Reader art submission: Madalynn Baeza, age 12



Reader art submission: Grant Nickol, age 8

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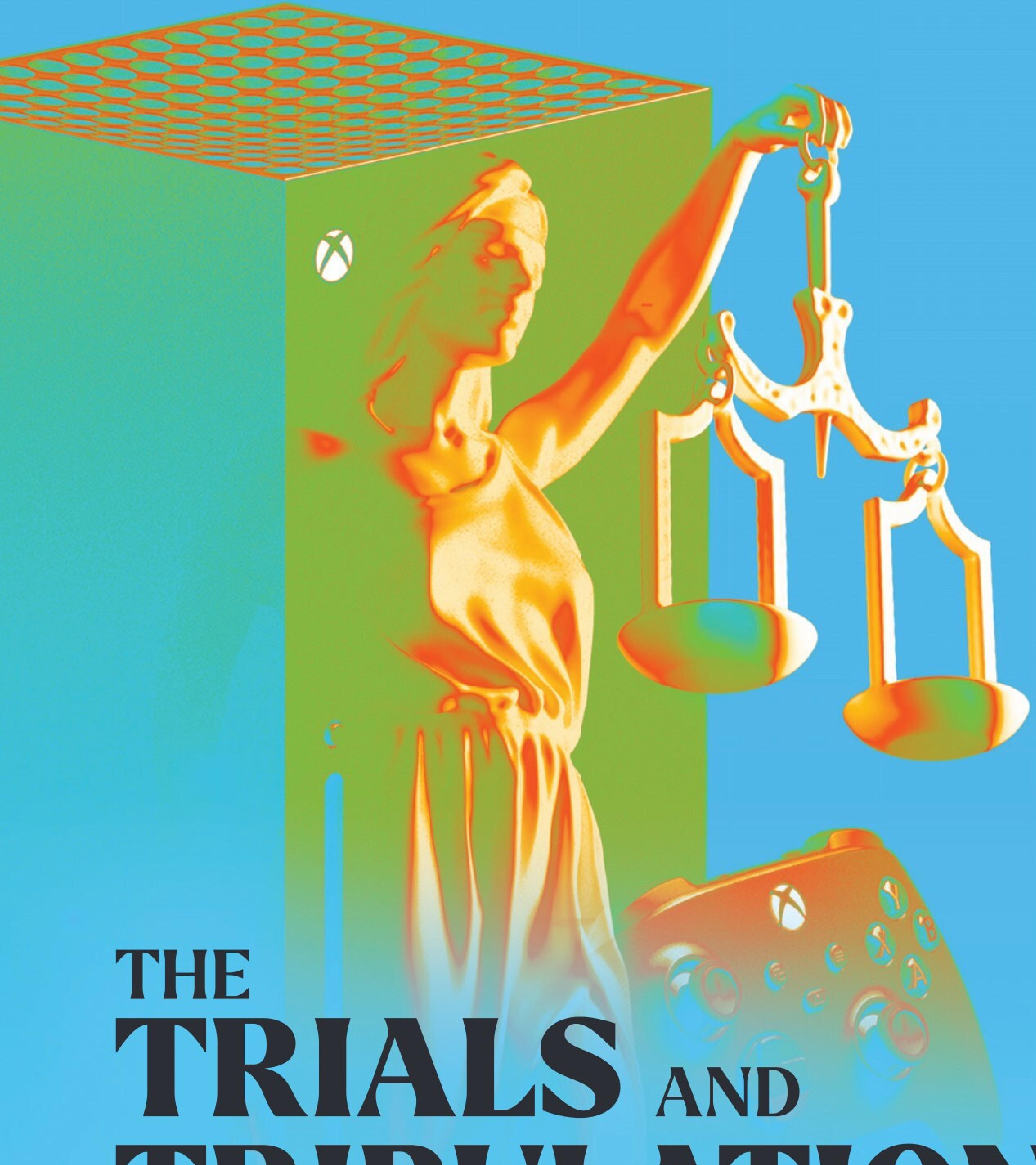

THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF AN ACQUISITION

Microsoft's colossal $69 billion purchase of Activision Blizzard is complete, but the road to finalization was paved with court cases, leaks, skepticism, rivalry, and more

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

Xbox's first-party studio lineup in 2017 consisted of five studios and a publishing arm: Rare, Turn 10, 343 Industries, The Coalition, Mojang Studios, and Xbox Game Studios Publishing. Today, six years later, Microsoft owns more than 50 studios, thanks to various acquisitions over the years.

Microsoft announced in January of 2022 that it was acquiring Call of Duty and Diablo maker Activision Blizzard for a colossal $68.7 billion, the largest video game acquisition ever. After nearly two years of Stateside court cases with the federal government, appeals and appeasements across the pond, unprecedented document leaks, direct arguments from rivals like PlayStation, and more, the deal is complete: Xbox is home to all 19 of Activision Blizzard's studios (and King's 11 mobile game development studios as well, since Activision Blizzard purchased the company in 2016).

Grand Ambition

Following the official announcement of the acquisition, lawyers and analysts were quick to bring up the U.S. Federal Trade Commission lawsuit against Microsoft in 1999, in which the regulatory agency argued that Microsoft was monopolizing the PC home market with its proprietary software and technology restrictions. Microsoft lost that case, with a judge ruling it violated the Sherman Antitrust Act. But an appeals court overturned it, and Microsoft and the FTC settled, which Lee Law founding partner Michael Lee says is typical.

"Ninety-nine percent of all these things get resolved by a settlement, but I think once you have a history of anti-competitive behavior – I don't think it's vengeance – but I definitely think there is more scrutiny placed on companies that did it once that might want to control the market in other areas," Lee, otherwise known as GeekAttorney online, tells me.

Roughly two and a half months after the initial acquisition announcement, four U.S. senators wrote a letter to the FTC asking them to challenge the acquisition, citing general tech consolidation concerns and how this acquisition might allow Activision Blizzard to sweep under the rug a litany of accusations including discrimination, sexual misconduct, and more. Lee says this wasn't surprising, nor out of turn for senators, noting, however, that the FTC is independent of the U.S. Senate.

The FTC announced last December it is suing Microsoft over anti-trust practices and monopolization concerns.

"The [FTC] is seeking to block technology giant Microsoft Corp. from acquiring leading video game developer Activision Blizzard, Inc. and its blockbuster gaming franchises such as Call of Duty, alleging that the $69 billion deal, Microsoft's largest ever and the biggest ever in the video gaming industry, would enable Microsoft to suppress competitors to its Xbox gaming consoles and its rapidly growing subscription content and cloud-gaming business," the FTC wrote in its announcement.

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Minecraft

While that December 2022 lawsuit was set for the FTC's in-house court, the agency also filed a separate case in a California court in an attempt to achieve preliminary injunction because "Microsoft and Activision have represented that they may consummate" the deal, according to court filings.

Lee says preliminary injunctions, when granted, pause a company's plans or actions. These injunctions are requested when whatever is on hand presents an immediate threat or harm. If a company were sending out a product that harmed people, someone suing would likely request a preliminary injunction so that the courts could quickly tell the company to stop sending out the harmful product until the lawsuit is complete. As for why, Lee says court cases take months, years sometimes – if harm or threat is involved, waiting a year is not in the interest of those worried about the potential for damage.

A Messy Day in Court

As a result of the FTC's lawsuit, various bigwigs, from Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella to Microsoft Gaming CEO Phil Spencer and Xbox corporate vice president Sarah Bond, testified in court. Across days of testimony, we learned a lot.

Bond claimed Activision demanded a larger revenue share to put Call of Duty on Xbox leading up to the series' 2020 release. Bethesda's now-former head of publishing, Pete Hines, revealed that Wolfenstein developer Machine Games' Indiana Jones will skip PlayStation 5. In a prerecorded deposition from PlayStation CEO Jim Ryan, who recently announced he's leaving the company, he said Xbox Game Pass is "value destructive" to publishers. Ryan and PlayStation were among the most vocal opponents of the acquisition, for obvious reasons, during court proceedings.

And that's just a tiny chunk of what we learned during this court case. California judge Jacqueline Scott Corley denied the FTC's request for a preliminary injunction on July 11, and the agency quickly appealed. The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals denied it.

These court cases later bit Microsoft in the butt, even if it achieved the desired outcome. Months after the court cases, in September of this year, more than 250 private documents leaked, including emails between top Xbox executives, after a clerical mistake by someone at Microsoft. From these leaks, we learned Xbox is planning its next-gen hybrid cloud console for 2028, that Bethesda might be planning to remaster Fallout 3 and The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, that the Xbox Series X might be getting a refresh with a new controller in 2024, and that at one point, Spencer considered acquiring Nintendo and Warner Bros. Games. Microsoft corrected course, but the damage was done.

"It is hard to see our team's work shared in this way because so much has changed and there's so much to be excited about right now, and in the future," Spencer shared on X, formerly Twitter, after the leaks. "We will share the real plans when we are ready."

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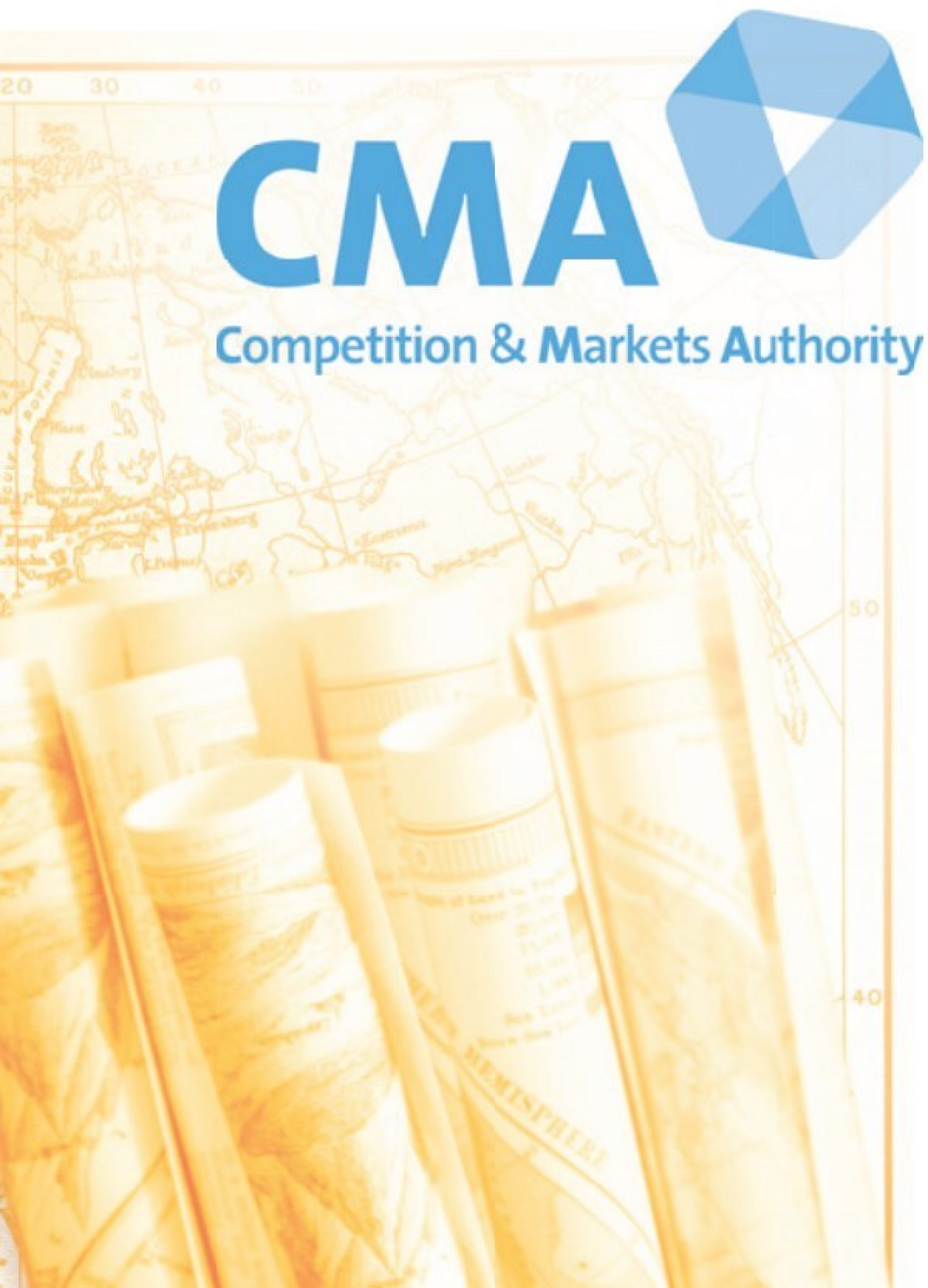
Concerns From Across the Pond

With the appeal denied, Microsoft was clear to close in the States. Across the Atlantic Ocean, the U.K.'s Competition and Markets Authority prevented Microsoft from closing the deal with the U.K. market intact. The CMA announced its investigation into the acquisition on July 6, 2022.

"Would I say these organizations affect each other? I don't see how they can't," Lee tells me when asked if the CMA's decision to get involved might have been influenced by the FTC's concerns. "If all these other agencies around the world are looking into some anti-competitive behavior, it would only be natural for [the CMA] to look at it. Do they have conversations on the record? Probably not, but off the record [...] discussions happen."

Lee says Microsoft could have technically closed the deal without the CMA's greenlight, but it would have had to carve Activision Blizzard games out of its U.K. market proceedings; you don't spend $69 billion to remove a market from your new purchase's potential. Set to appear in court on July 28 of this year to appeal the CMA's initial April 2023 block, Microsoft instead paused its appeal on July 11 to negotiate with the agency.

That led to a new deal, submitted on August 22, that proposed Ubisoft get the rights to Activision Blizzard game streaming for 15 years in the U.K. market. A month later, the CMA granted Microsoft preliminary approval. On October 13, the CMA approved Microsoft's acquisition of Activision Blizzard. But it was clear the CMA was less than thrilled with how Microsoft handled itself during the process.



"[Businesses] and advisors should be in no doubt that the tactics employed by Microsoft are no way to engage with the CMA. Microsoft had the chance to restructure during our initial investigation but instead continued to insist on a package of measures that we told them simply wouldn't work," CMA chief executive Sarah Cardell wrote in the agency's approval. "Dragging out proceedings in this way only wastes time and money."

Closing the Deal

Hours after the CMA's October 13 approval, Microsoft announced it had officially acquired Activision Blizzard.

It did so with the corporate pomp and circumstance you'd expect: an "Activision Blizzard King Joins Xbox Official Trailer" with a tone that'd have you thinking Microsoft just saved the world, a promise to deliver new worlds and stories, and Spencer's often repeated sentiment of bringing more games to more players in more places. Controversial Activision Blizzard CEO Bobby Kotick revealed he was staying with the company through 2023, at the request of Spencer, to help with the transition, before a multi-million-dollar golden parachute likely sends him on his way in 2024. The official Activision Blizzard Twitter account said the company will begin adding its games to Game Pass "sometime in the course of the next year."

October 13 was a big win for Xbox and its community and an even bigger win for Microsoft. After nearly two years of hurdles, court cases, document leaks, and more, it had finally completed the acquisition.

"We thought it would go through," Lee says when I ask if he and his law peers expected the deal to pass. "We've seen bigger mergers go through [outside of games]. It just needed to overcome the hurdles to make everyone happy."

As for what's next, Lee expects Microsoft to cool down on multi-billion-dollar acquisitions.

"When there's smoke, there's fire," Lee says. "If they went ahead and tried to do any multi-billion mergers, people would look into it further and say, 'We were right.' But this is their model. [Acquisitions] like this occur maybe once a decade [...], so I do think there will be a cooldown but not a slowdown of their initial business plan which says, 'If there's another company doing it right and doing it better than we can, let's acquire them and bring their knowledge in house.'

"But maybe instead of Microsoft purchasing it, it's Blizzard purchasing it now." ■

INSIDE JAPAN'S GUNDAM FACTORY

A rare glimpse into the creation of Gundam models

BY ALEX VAN AKEN AND BLAKE HESTER

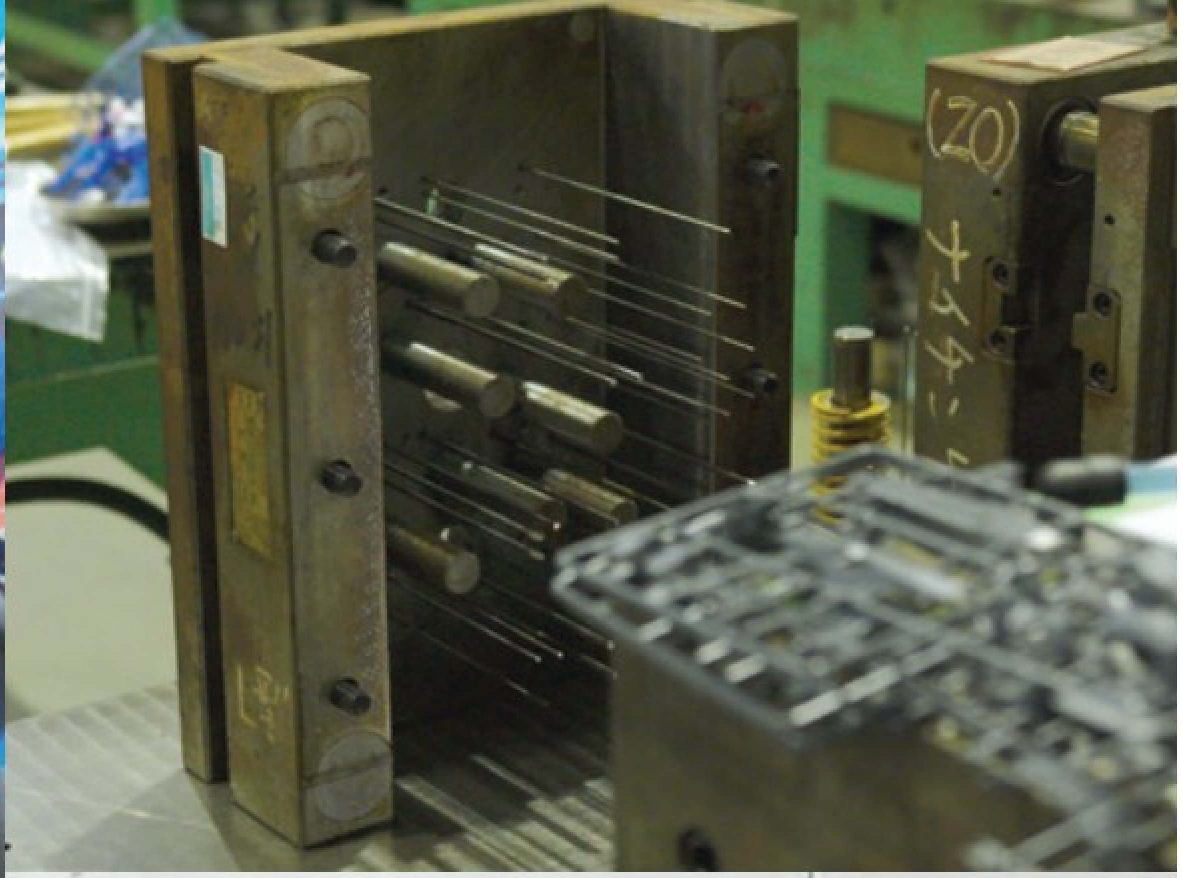
ON A RECENT TRIP TO JAPAN, we visited the Bandai Hobby Factory in Shizuoka* to see how Gundam Plastic Models (or Gunpla) are made.

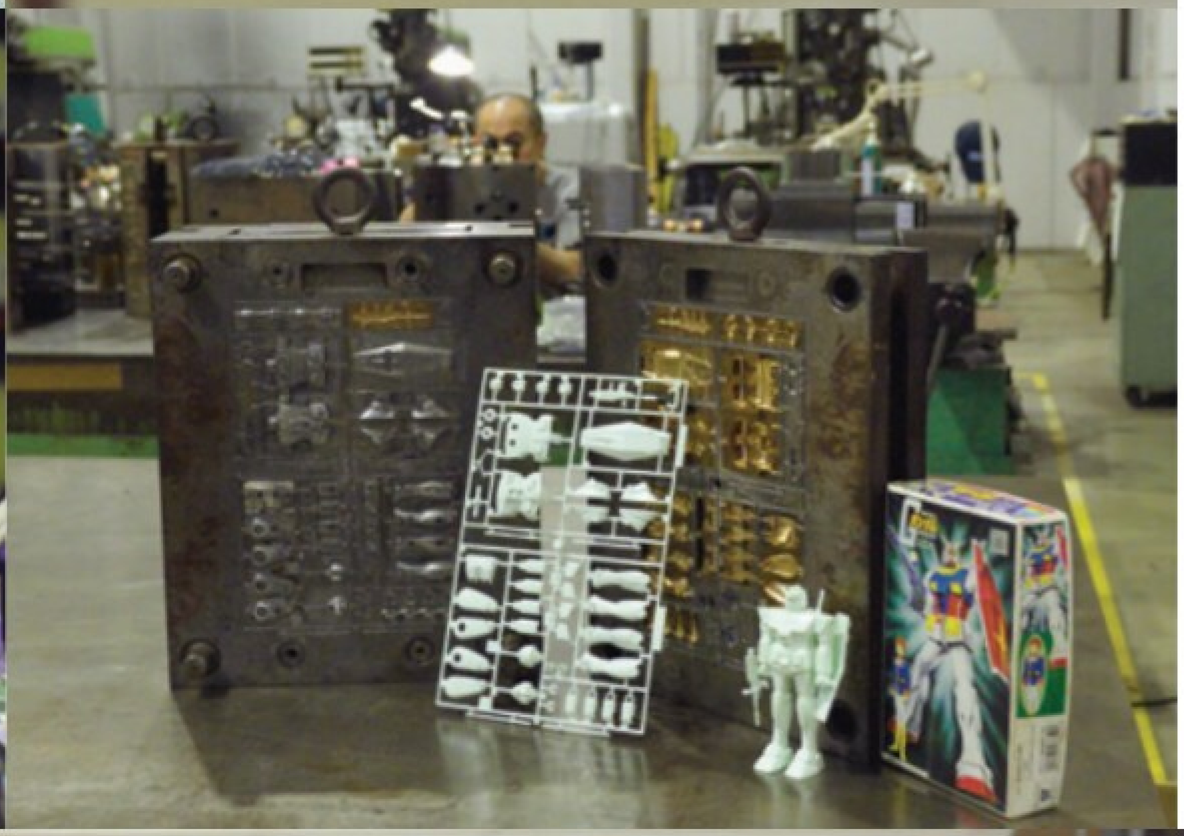
We saw the offices where the model kits are designed, the titular factory where the plastic runners are printed, and so many bags of resin. But most notably, towards the end of our trip, we were given a look at the very first Gundam mold ever produced (see image).

Gunpla was originally released in 1980. Unsurprisingly, the first kit was of the RX-78-2 (more or less the mascot of Gundam), released in July for ¥300. As of March 2022, Bandai has shipped 735.70 million Gundam kits. But impressively, it still uses the first mold it ever produced when reissuing the original RX-78-2 kit.

Unfortunately, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Bandai no longer allows visitors to its Hobby Factory. However, we have the next best thing. Over on our YouTube channel, you can watch a full tour of the factory, guided by Miyuki Nakagiri, the assistant manager of the business strategy team. ■

**Fun fact: the kanji for Shizuoka, 静 and 岡, translate to "Silent" and "Hill" – which might mean something to survival horror fans.*





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Clockwise from top left:

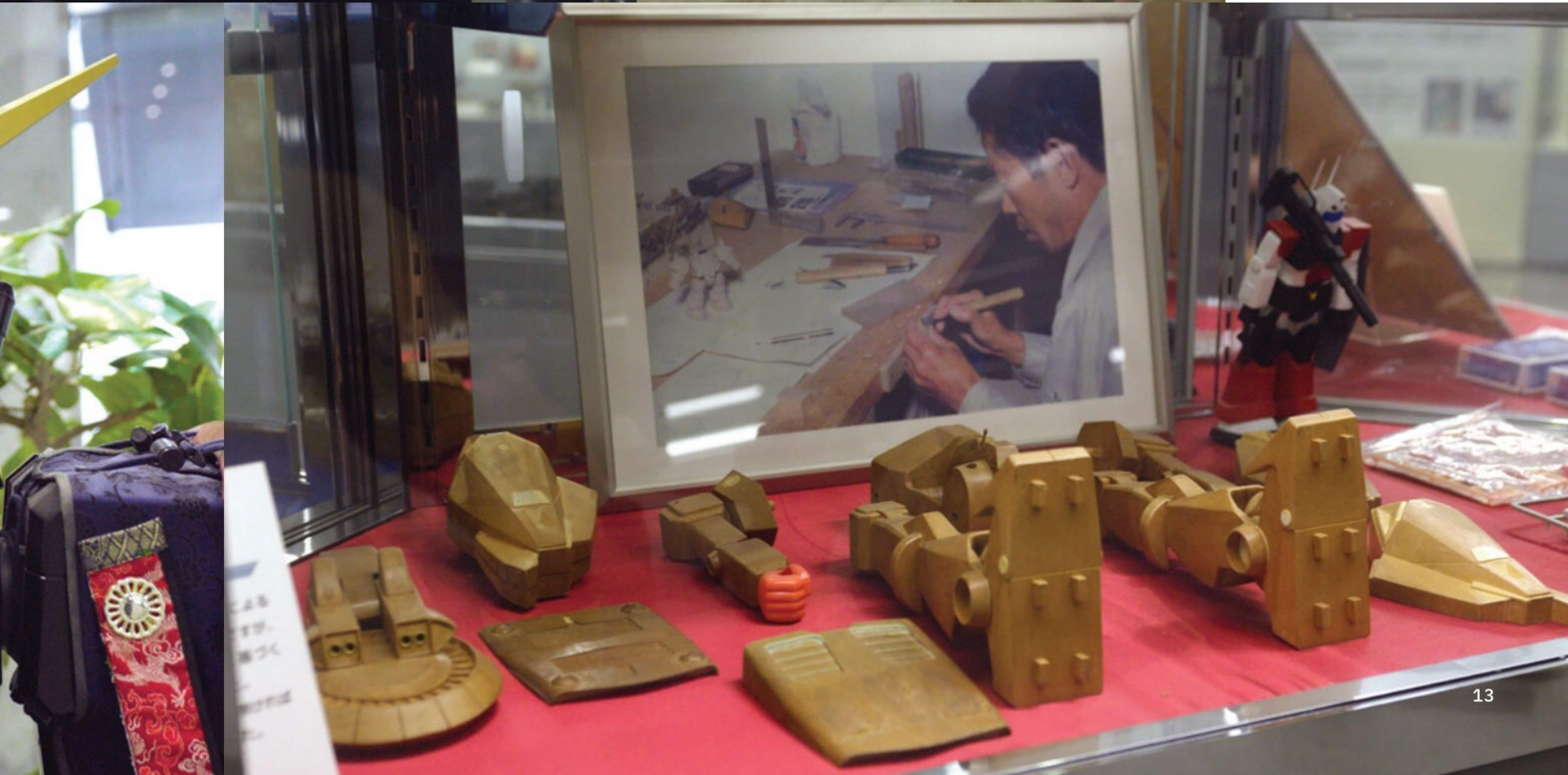
The original Gundam Plastic Model, released in 1980

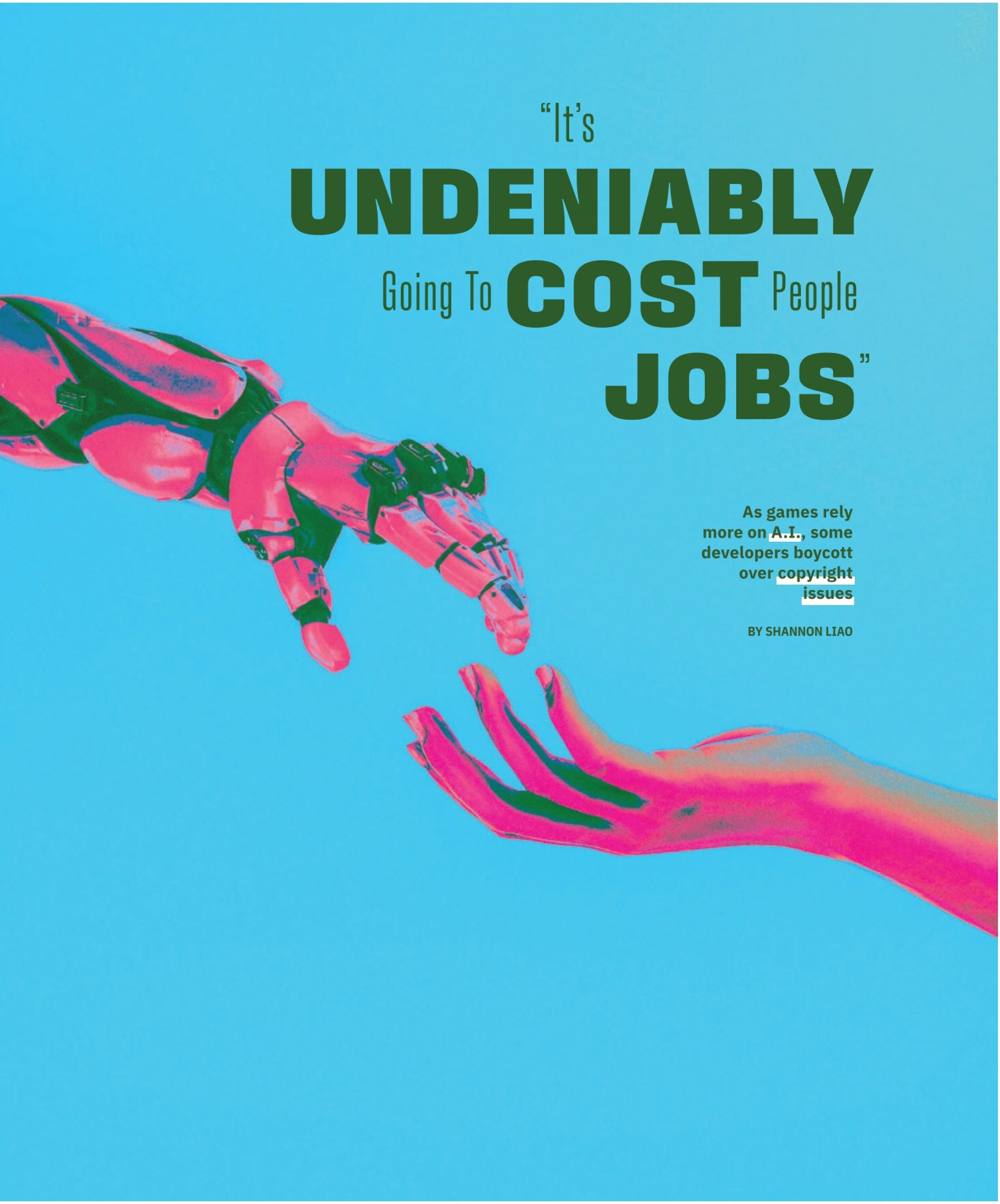
Inside the molding

Bandai producer Atsuo Yoshimura

First Gundam mold and consumer packaging

An example of the wooden prototypes craftsmen used to make when designing early Gundam models





“It’s UNDENIABLY Going To COST People JOBS”

As games rely more on A.I., some developers boycott over copyright issues

BY SHANNON LIAO

API
RESEARCH

ChatGPT: Optimizing Language Models for Dialogue

We've trained a model called ChatGPT which interacts in a conversational way. The dialogue format makes it possible for ChatGPT to answer followup questions, admit its mistakes, challenge incorrect premises, and reject inappropriate requests. ChatGPT is a sibling model to InstructGPT, which is trained to follow an instruction in a prompt and provide a detailed response.

I've been speaking to ChatGPT for months.

It swears up and down that it doesn't have feelings. It's not a person. But it can write me a short story in the style of Disco Elysium and F. Scott Fitzgerald about becoming a person and landing on Earth – if I give it the right prompts.

So how much do we have to fear about A.I. taking over? The debate about generative A.I. and its capabilities and downsides has exploded this year, being the topic du jour at the annual Game Developers Conference in San Francisco, California, consuming the minds of executives, developers, and artists alike. Generative A.I. can make art and iterate on a line of dialogue faster than humans can. But humans are wary of using these tools and the toll they could take on jobs and copyrights around art and writing.

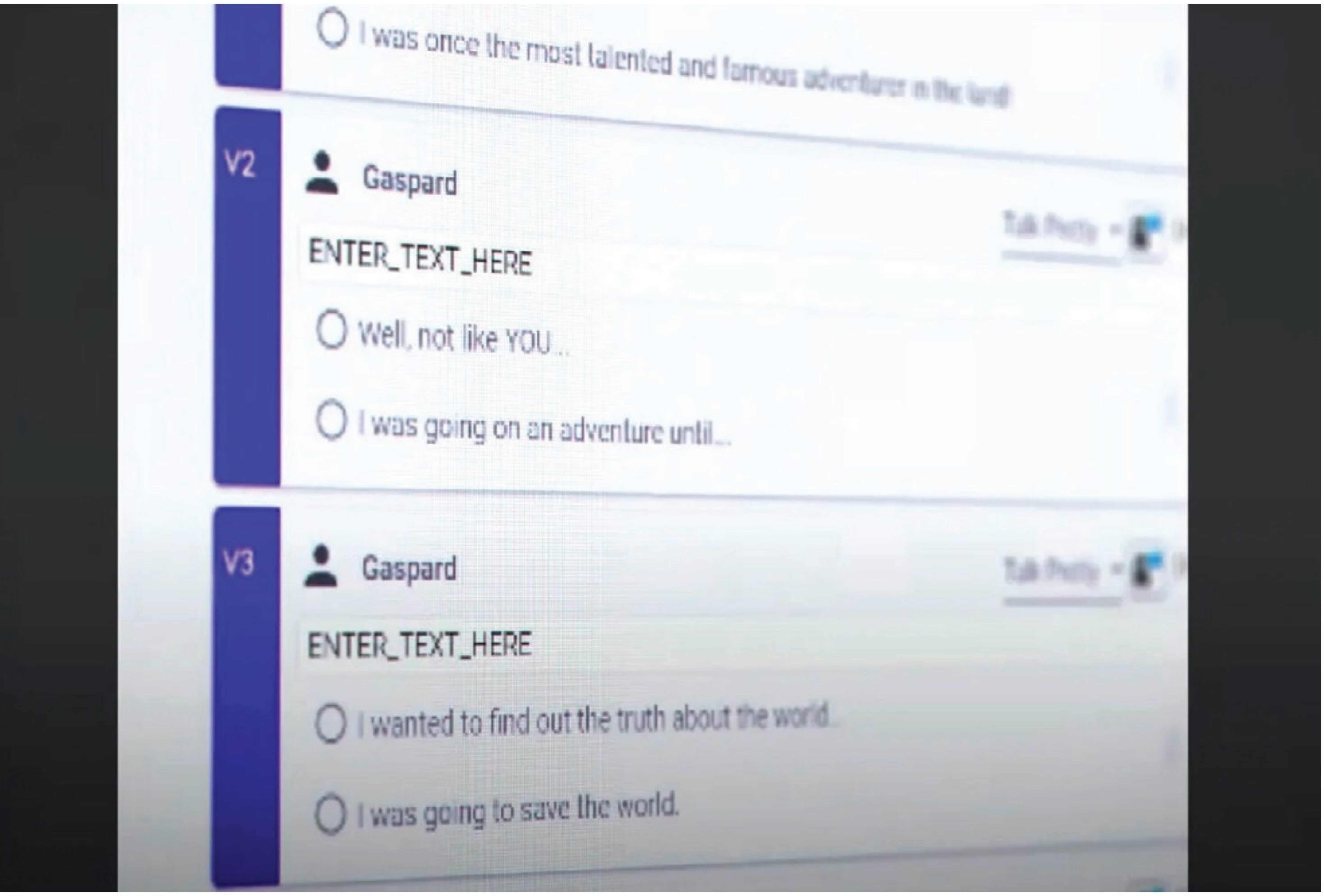
It's still early days for many of these companies to turn out games that heavily rely on generative A.I. But many executives are clear that they're certainly thinking about it, even as serious copyright issues arise over how A.I. gets its data.

"It's difficult for us to comment on generative A.I. except to the point that we are very interested to see how creators are using this technology," says Sony AI's chief operating officer, Michael Spranger, in an interview with *Game Informer*. "There's a discussion around this technology potentially impacting people. Some of the issues around [copy] rights are very important to us."

Some gaming executives say they can see A.I. cutting down on laborious and menial tasks. The former head of Halo Infinite, Chris Lee, tells me that "game developers have never been able to keep up with the demands of our audiences."

In April, Blizzard's chief design officer, Allen Adham, told employees that an internal tool called Blizzard Diffusion, the company's version of Stable Diffusion, could be a "major evolution in how we build and manage our games." When reached for comment, Blizzard public relations says the situation likely has not changed since.

Generative A.I., which powers tools like ChatGPT and Midjourney, uses computing power to find patterns in images and texts. In other words, it continuously iterates on what already exists, drawing on art and text from human creators, often without permission. This diminutive way of looking at art has some developers worried A.I. will spit out games that bore players, who can tell when art is being reused and are used to being vocal.



○ I was once the most talented and famous adventurer in the land!

ENTER_TEXT_HERE

○ Well, not like YOU...

○ I was going on an adventure until...

ENTER_TEXT_HERE

○ I wanted to find out the truth about the world...

○ I was going to save the world.

↙ Ubisoft's Ghostwriter

In April, Electronic Arts told the *Wall Street Journal* that it was considering using generative A.I. in almost all of its games to draw up game levels, replacing the need to manually sketch them out by hand.

Microsoft has shared that it could use A.I. to find bugs in games, a job formerly mostly delegated to humans.

Ubisoft built a tool called Ghostwriter, which uses A.I. to write lines of dialogue for non-playable characters to help fill open worlds with chatter.

"Creating believable large open worlds is a daunting task," says Yves Jacquier, executive director of Ubisoft La Forge, the research and development team responsible for Ghostwriter, in a May interview.

Jacquier says that Ghostwriter was a request from writers who faced the difficult task of filling games with more than 100,000 lines of dialogue. He compared Ghostwriter to using procedural generation – commonly used to automatically produce content in games – to create millions of slightly different trees to give a player the simulation of a forest.

Jacquier says players want to feel each character and situation in a world is unique, so A.I. can help add variations.

He adds that "A.I. needs to assist the creator, not the creation, and as such, cannot be a substitute to the original creation" and that Ghostwriter needed writers to use it; otherwise, it wouldn't work.

An A.I. start-up, Didimo, says that it gives developers a way to automatically create three-dimensional characters in the style of a game without a delay. CEO Verónica Orvalho says, "We're helping game studios, from executive producers to artists, better manage costs." Soleil Game Studios, which makes fighting games like Naruto and Samurai Jack, has already used Didimo to make hundreds of non-playable characters. Didimo has new clients that it has yet to announce.

Another company, Inworld AI, raised over $100 million in funding from investors, including Microsoft, venture capital, and Stanford University. Inworld helps developers create non-playable characters.

"Last year, when we've been talking to clients, we were trying to convince them that they need to have smart NPCs within their games because they would improve retention, engagement, playtime," Ilya Gelfenbeyn, CEO of Inworld and a former Google executive, says. "End of last year, they all started to play with ChatGPT and basically faced all the challenges that we've been solving in the last two years, so this year, it's much easier to talk to all of them. They're prepared; they know what they're looking for."

Gelfenbeyn says he could not talk about the majority of his clients because the large triple-A companies were "extremely secretive, especially with their new titles."

Scenario.gg, which raised $6 million in seed funding in January, turns text prompts into images, pulling from a Stable Diffusion database, which developers can place in games. Some smaller companies have been working with Scenario. Stable Diffusion uses a dataset of nearly 6 billion images scraped from the web, which contains several copyrighted creations.

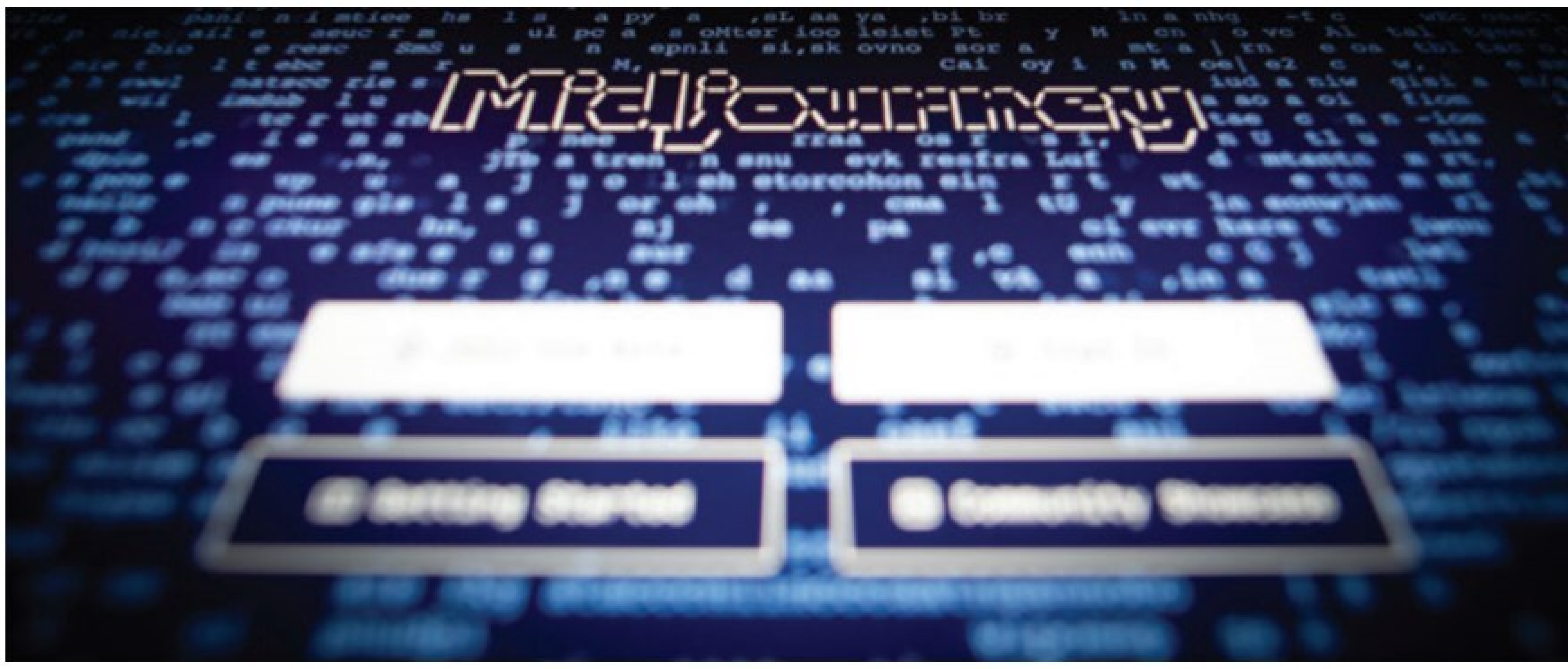
> "A.I. needs to assist the creator, not the creation, and as such, cannot be a substitute to the original creation"

Scenario co-founder and CEO Emmanuel de Maistre says that generative A.I. in video games is "a very competitive field."

"There is definitely a challenge to be ahead of everyone and have the most money to hire the biggest team and deliver the most comprehensive product," he says. "We're still refining, improving, updating the systems. We should not expect the system to be perfect, anyway. This is going to take years until we have something, a system that's much more efficient, safer, truthful, and so on."

De Maistre says he monitors the evolving copyright situation as judges review lawsuits. If they ruled that people training their data set and writing text prompts was sufficient human input, "we might see the first AI-based copyrighted artwork."

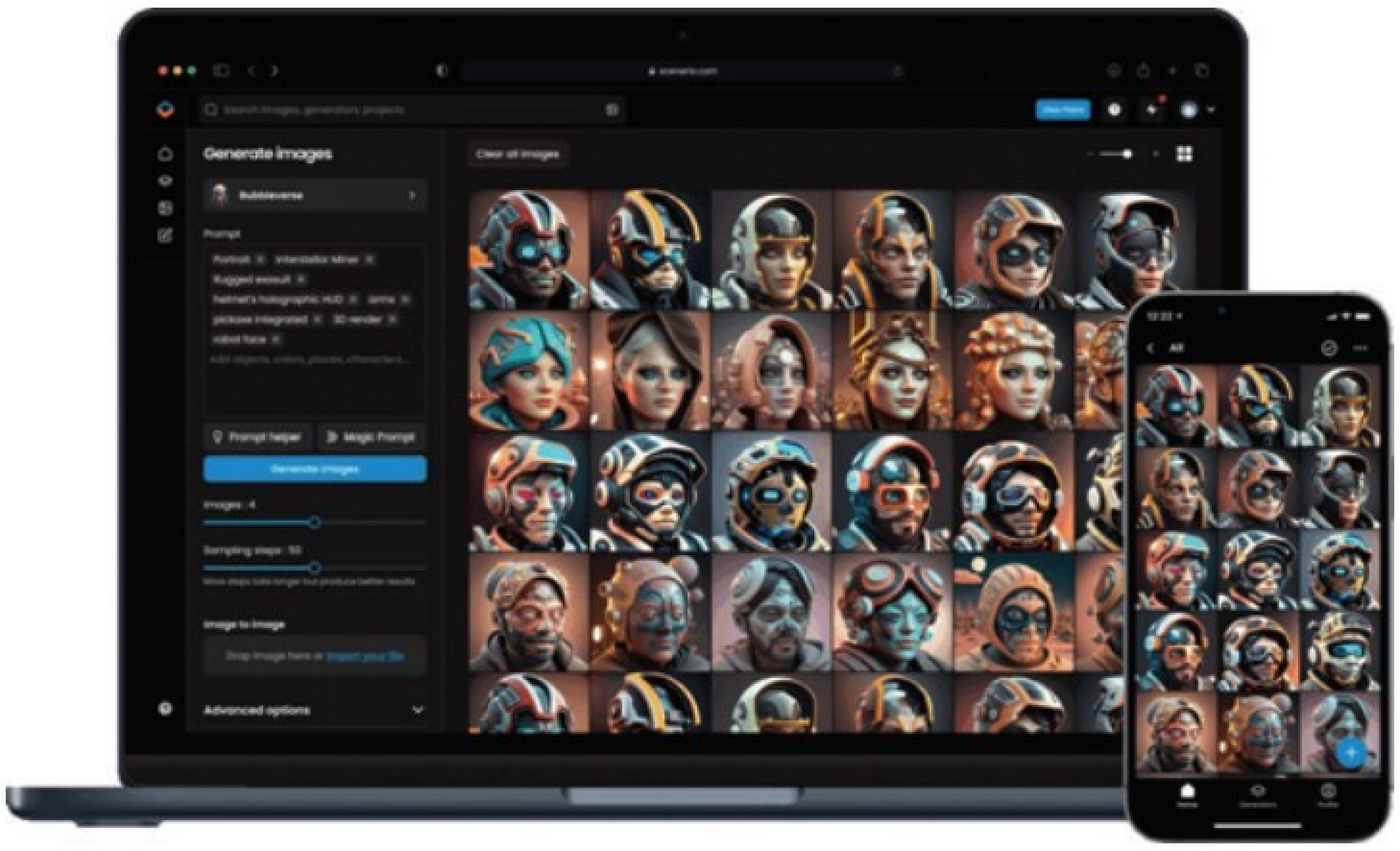
While game companies are thinking about using these tools, they're also wary of giving up the copyrights to their intellectual property by entering their information into tools like ChatGPT and Midjourney. In February, Getty Images sued Stable Diffusion, accusing it of scraping 12 million images from its photo database. Last year, three artists sued multiple generative A.I. platforms in an ongoing class action lawsuit.



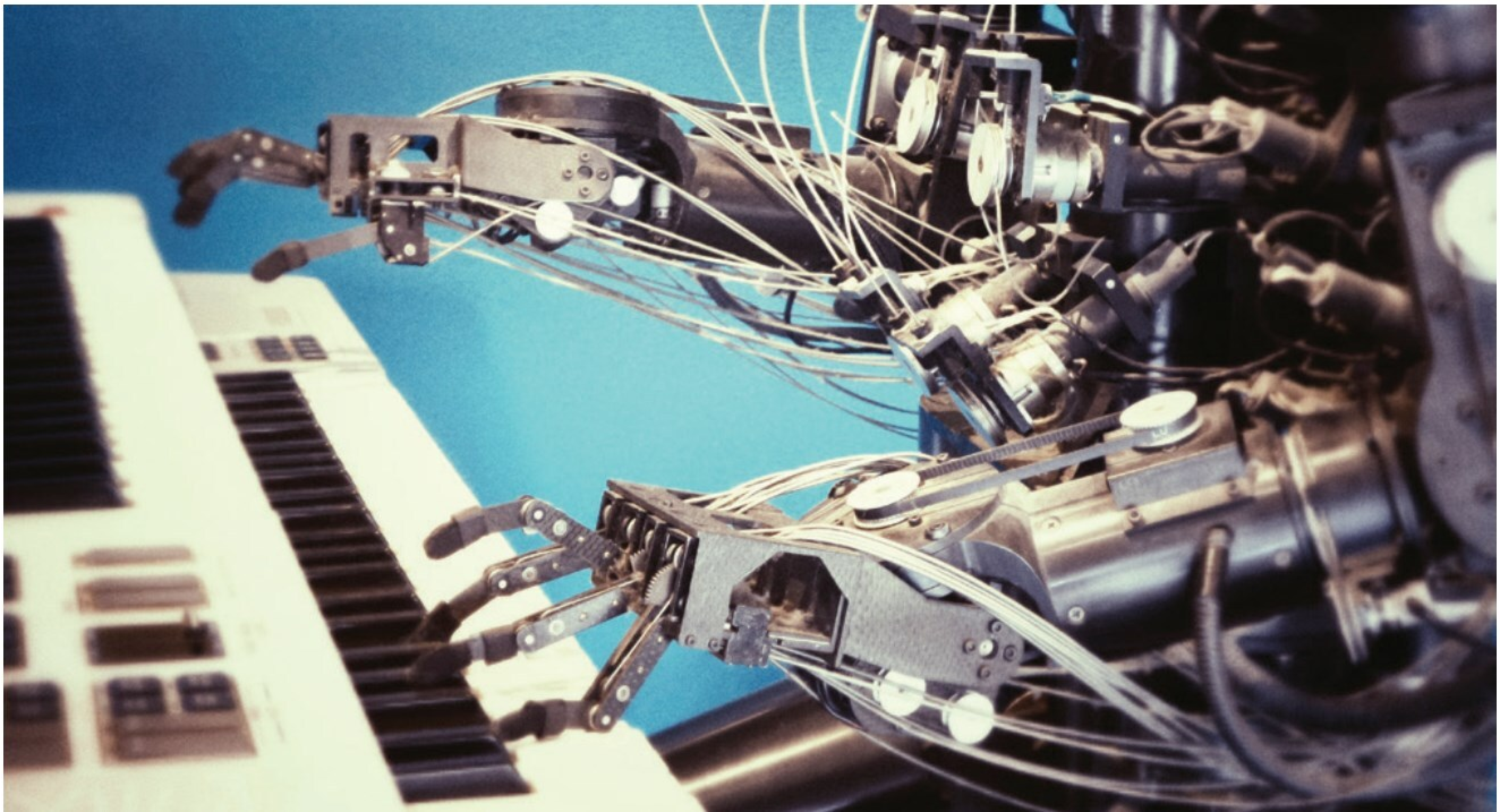
"Right now, for myself and many other game developers, generative A.I. is a no-go for our games," says Jes Negrón, founder of RETCON Games. "The technology itself is exciting, but the way content is sourced for the datasets is, frankly, unethical. In a world where we're required to trade our labor for money to survive, I don't see how anyone can justify thousands of writers, artists, musicians, and other creatives not being compensated for use of their work in these A.I. models – and all without their consent."

"It's undeniably going to cost people jobs," says Dennis Fong, co-founder and CEO of GGWP, a platform that uses A.I. to help moderate toxicity in games. He envisions that once a team comes up with the core gameplay for a project, they can feed it to the A.I., which can generate how the game looks and feels, its narrative, universe, and more.

Scenario.gg
↙



> “In a world where we’re required to trade our labor for money to survive, I don’t see how anyone can justify thousands of writers, artists, musicians, and other creatives not being compensated for use of their work in these A.I. models – and all without their consent.”



Fong gave the example of Amazon's New World, which he and his friends played until they hit max level. He says he felt the game ran out of content and that it took years to make quests and dungeons and "all this stuff to keep me engaged with the game."

"So if you think about generative A.I. and what it could do, maybe this is no longer an issue if you can actually have A.I. generate new classes, new stories, new characters, new zones. That's stuff that A.I. has already proven to be really good at," Fong says. "Is that good for games? At the end of the day, it's good for games."

Some industry analysts say that artificial intelligence may not necessarily make games richer.

"The avalanche of vanilla content that is about to hit the market will deliver little more than an occasional flash in the pan," says Joost van Dreunen, a lecturer on the business of games at the NYU Stern School of Business. "It will be a studio's ability to cultivate a sustainable community around a novel title that will be the differentiator.'"

Van Dreunen adds that A.I. will likely generate mediocre or average-quality content.

"Most folks are simply interested in turning the word 'A.I.' into funny money so they can make some nonsense with stolen data and then move along to the next grift. This is why I will never be rich," says Brandon Sheffield, director of indie game studio Necrosoft Games.

Sheffield notes that many large language models train on data without asking for the consent of those who created and represent that data.

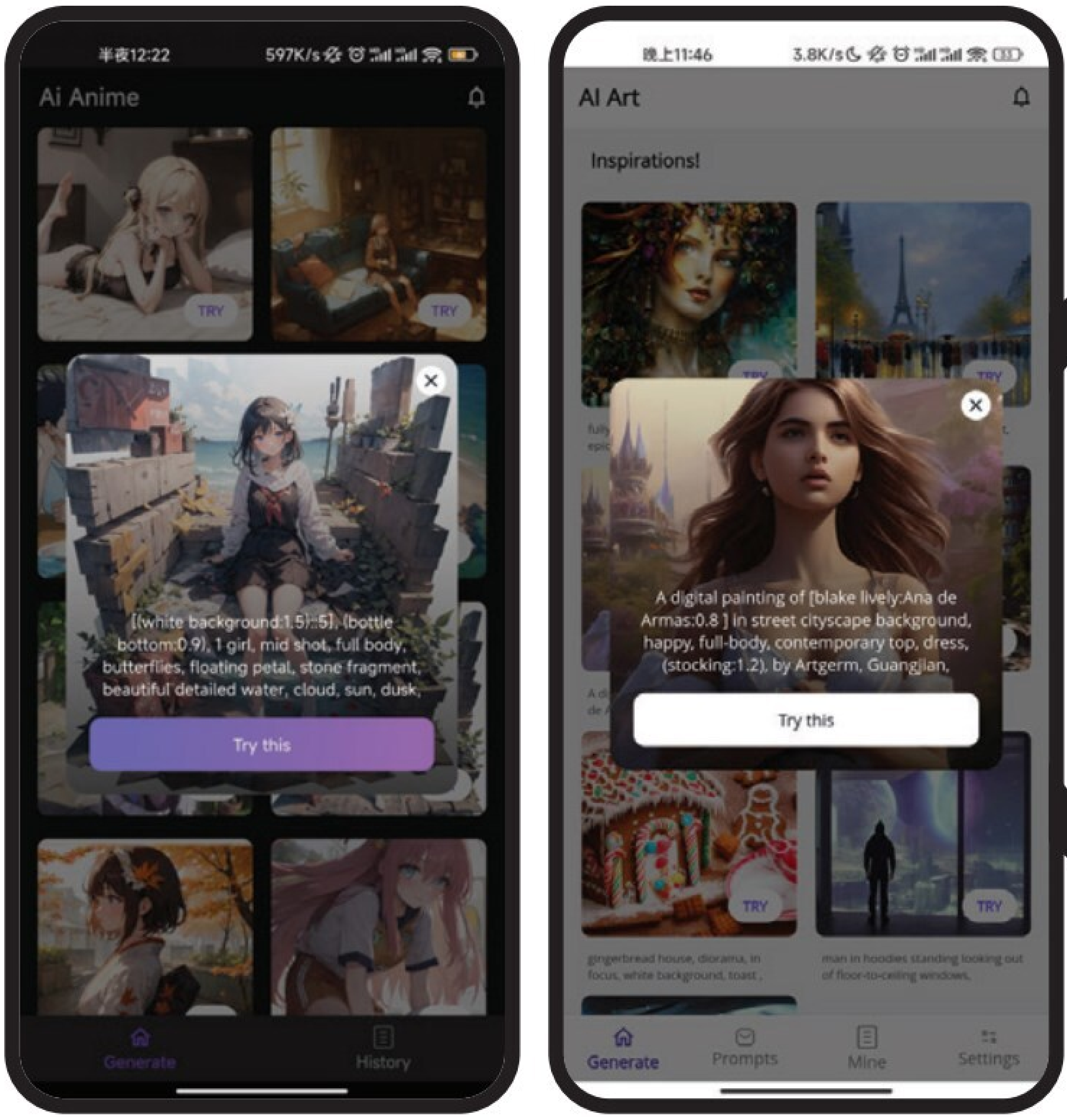
For instance, ChatGPT admitted to me that it has sourced my articles from the *Washington Post*, *CNN*, and *The Verge* in the past, but it cannot remember my exact name and cannot credit me.

Other developers share Sheffield's perspective and have tried to avoid working with companies that market themselves as A.I. game studios. A similar skepticism has arisen around the Web3 and non-fungible tokens (NFT) space, which crashed last year, leading some companies to collapse.

"I'm also skeptical because of how a lot of the same companies that were talking about NFTs and Crypto last year are talking about generative A.I. today. It doesn't breed confidence to see the grifters as the earliest adopters," Sheffield says.

Polish video game designer Adrian Chmielarz agrees. "I'm not particularly sure it's as useful as people think it is or would be," he says. "A.I. NPCs, quests generated by A.I., etc. – it all sounds great, but is this really what people want? Will they enjoy a conversation or a quest the same way as when they know these were hand-crafted by a human? I have my doubts."

The A.I. movement is already well underway, with companies developing this technology. In the coming weeks, months, and years, A.I.'s impact on labor, video games, and us will become increasingly apparent. ■



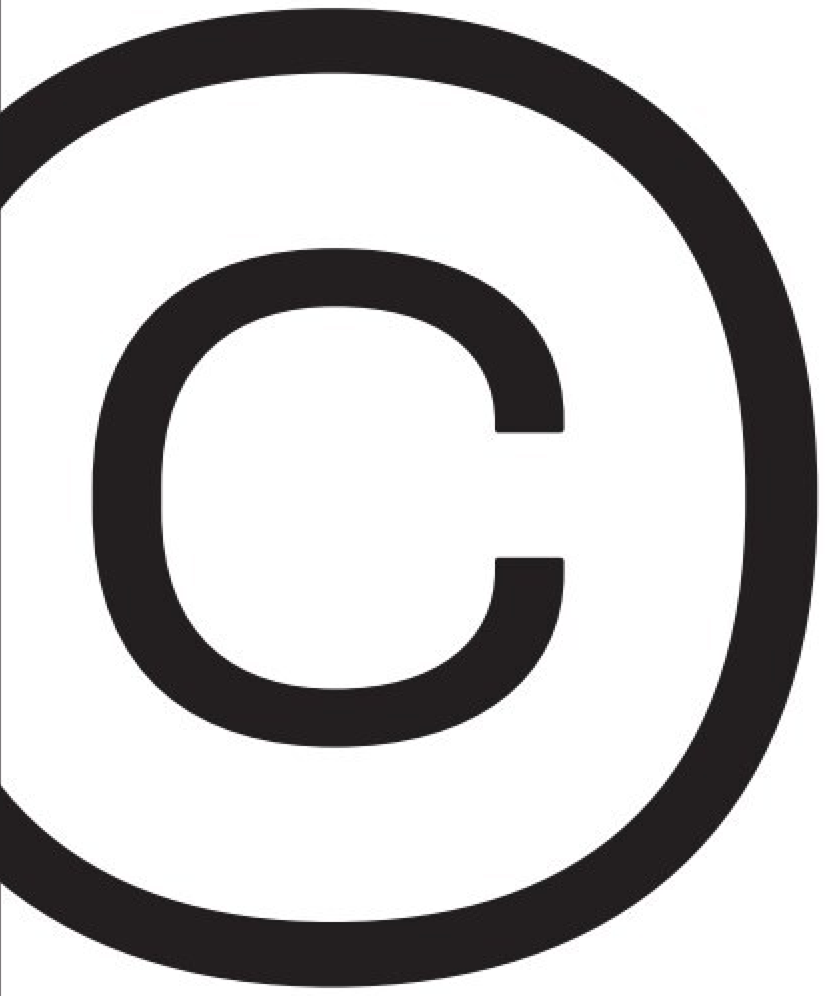
[(white background:1.5)::5], (bottle bottom:0.9), 1 girl, mid shot, full body, butterflies, floating petal, stone fragment, beautiful detailed water, cloud, sun, dusk,

A digital painting of [blake lively:Ana de Armas:0.8] in street cityscape background, happy, full-body, contemporary top, dress, (stocking:1.2), by Artgerm, Guangjian,

gingerbread house, diorama, in focus, white background, toast ,

man in hoodies standing looking out of floor-to-ceiling windows.

Stable Diffusion ↙



TOP FIVE

PLANET-KILLING CORPORATIONS

Unfortunately, it turns out corporations can be bad

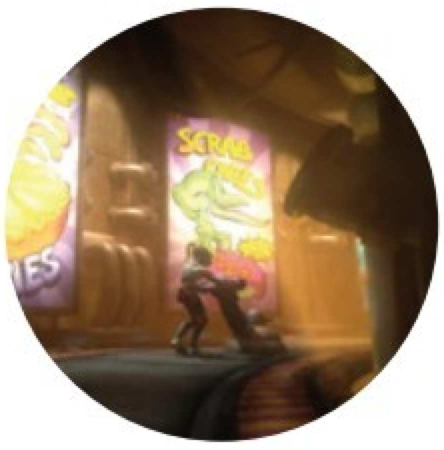
BY KYLE HILLIARD

1 Despite being called the "Lifestream," which by name alone sounds important and necessary to the planet Final Fantasy VII takes place on, **Shinra Electric Power Company** still insists on draining it to produce Mako. Its efforts are slowly killing the planet, which to be perfectly clear, is a bad thing.

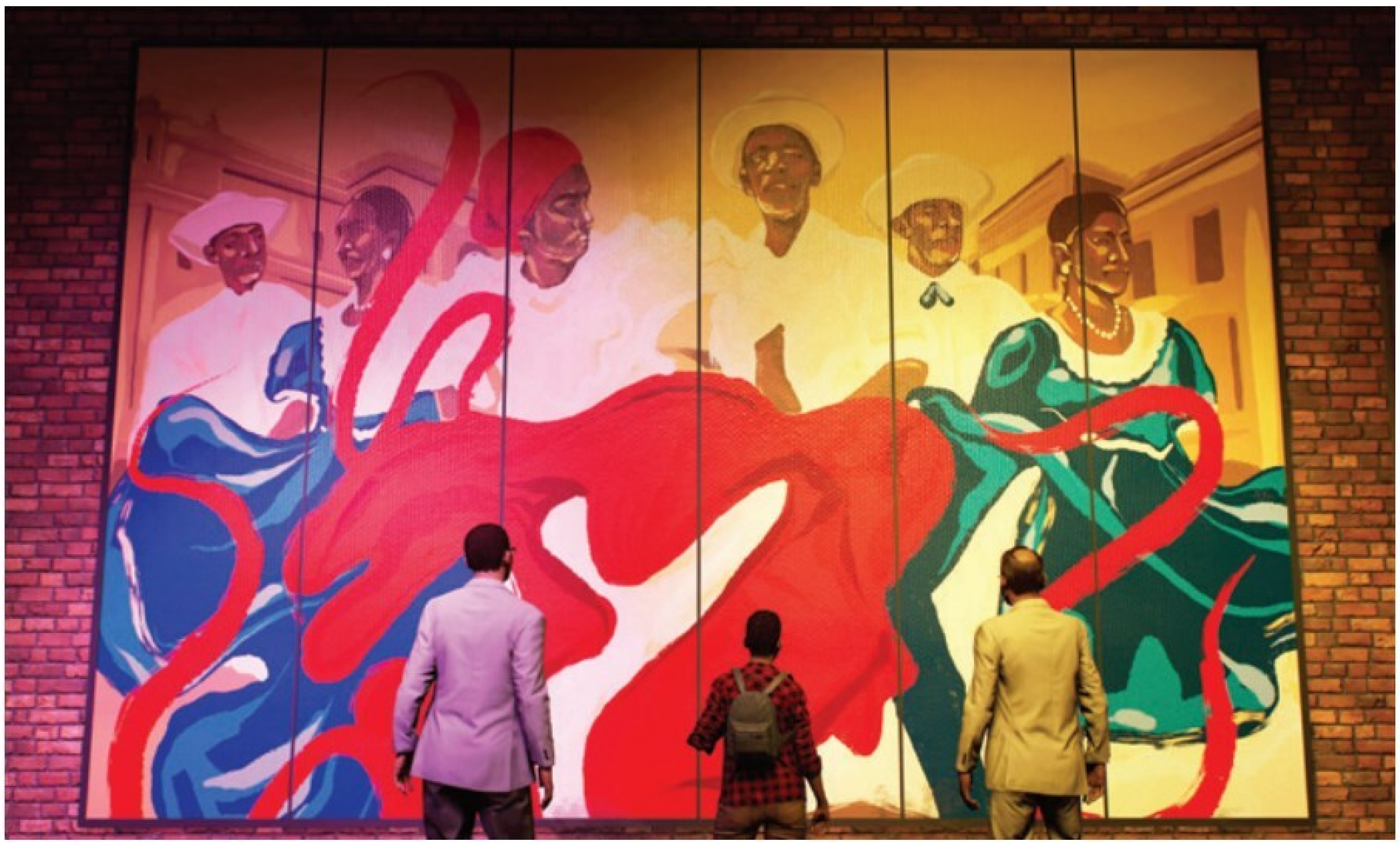
2 In the universe of Dead Space, the **Concordance Extraction Corporation** is a profitable company that employs many people... by literally destroying planets. Do we even need to explain what its primary business, planet cracking, is or why it's bad for planets?

3 **Umbrella Corporation** started innocently enough by manufacturing cosmetics. It was when it decided to start exploring the world of pharmaceuticals that it began experimenting with viruses and monsters, which led to the ongoing horrors of Resident Evil.

4 Helmed by the despicable Handsome Jack, the **Hyperion** corporation in Borderlands makes guns and generally trouble for anyone on Pandora who wants to stay alive. It is intent on over-harvesting the planet's resources and just being generally evil.



5 In the Oddworld games, **Rupture Farms** is a meat processing facility that provides food to the local population. The problem, which is often the case with evil corporations, is it got greedy and decided to start using the population as ingredients. ■



OPINION

Community, Culture, and Miles Morales

Why this side quest in Spider-Man 2 means so much to me

BY CHARLES HARTE

This piece contains spoilers for the Harlem Cultural Museum side quest in Marvel's Spider-Man 2.

Miles Morales is a comic book character created to represent people of color. Leading up to the 2008 election, which resulted in the United States' first African American president, Barack Obama, Marvel wanted to "take a good look" at one of their icons to reimagine as African American. A few years later, when an internet campaign pushed *Community* actor Donald Glover to play Spider-Man, the icon was chosen, and writer Brian Michael Bendis and artist Sara Pichelli created Miles. Every iteration of the character continues this legacy of representation, and Insomniac Games' Spider-Man 2 is no different. You can read our full review of the game on page 66, but I want to focus on one specific part: a series of jazz-themed side quests.

Up in Harlem, criminal forces are conspiring to halt the opening of the Harlem Cultural Museum. Curator Angela has assembled an amazing collection of jazz memorabilia, but on the day a big donor comes to pledge his funds, the building is raided, and the instruments are stolen. Relative to the game's main story, which has players battling huge villains and tearing up the city in the process, the stakes of this mission are low – but still high enough to warrant Spider-Man's help.

Miles is invested not just because his mom Rio is the one asking him for help but because he cares about his community, and as an aspiring musician himself, he's curious about the history, too. Throughout each quest, Miles hunts down the instruments, meeting up with people in the neighborhood along the way. When he retrieves a saxophone, he gets a lesson about the connections between jazz and hip hop (Miles' music of choice) from an older Black man, enhancing Miles' understanding of the importance of his mission.

I'm not interested in spoiling the ending of this quest, except to say that, unlike most quests in the Spider-Man games, it's not done to set up a supervillain cameo. The scale is as small as the first quest implies, and that's a relief. It feels more personal that way.

The culmination of this questline is what's stuck with me in the weeks since playing. At the end of the day, the exhibit is restored, and the whole neighborhood is invited to celebrate the success. All the music history that had been hinted at is put on full display, literally – proper museum exhibits show off Charlie Parker's saxophone, Clyde Stubblefield's drum set, and a whole lot more. It's a quick but proper look into some of the biggest figures of the early 1900s jazz scene, complete with instruments, tap shoes, and poetry.

At the same time, the museum is scattered with people you interacted with across your quest to recover the stolen artifacts. Commonly recurring characters like Miles' best friend Ganke and Rio are here, but you can also speak with people like curator Angela or the man who explained Charlie Parker's saxophone to you. Saving lives is something you do countless times in these games, but uniting a community and preserving its culture is uniquely touching. As Miles takes in the museum celebration, I can't help but think that this was why his character was created.

I have always related to and felt represented by Miles Morales, but this goes beyond that. Here, Miles is actively protecting the values I hold as a member of the Black community. The history of Black art is genuinely important, and the museum highlights that in a way that emphasizes communal joy and togetherness, an angle we're not always afforded. It's rare that I truly relate to a character on screen and even rarer that I relate to a character in a video game, but Spider-Man 2 manages to go one step past that. As Miles unites with his friends and family to celebrate Black art, I am not just seen. I am understood. ■

VIOLENCE IS INEVITABLE

Inside the making of Humanity, 2023's best puzzle game

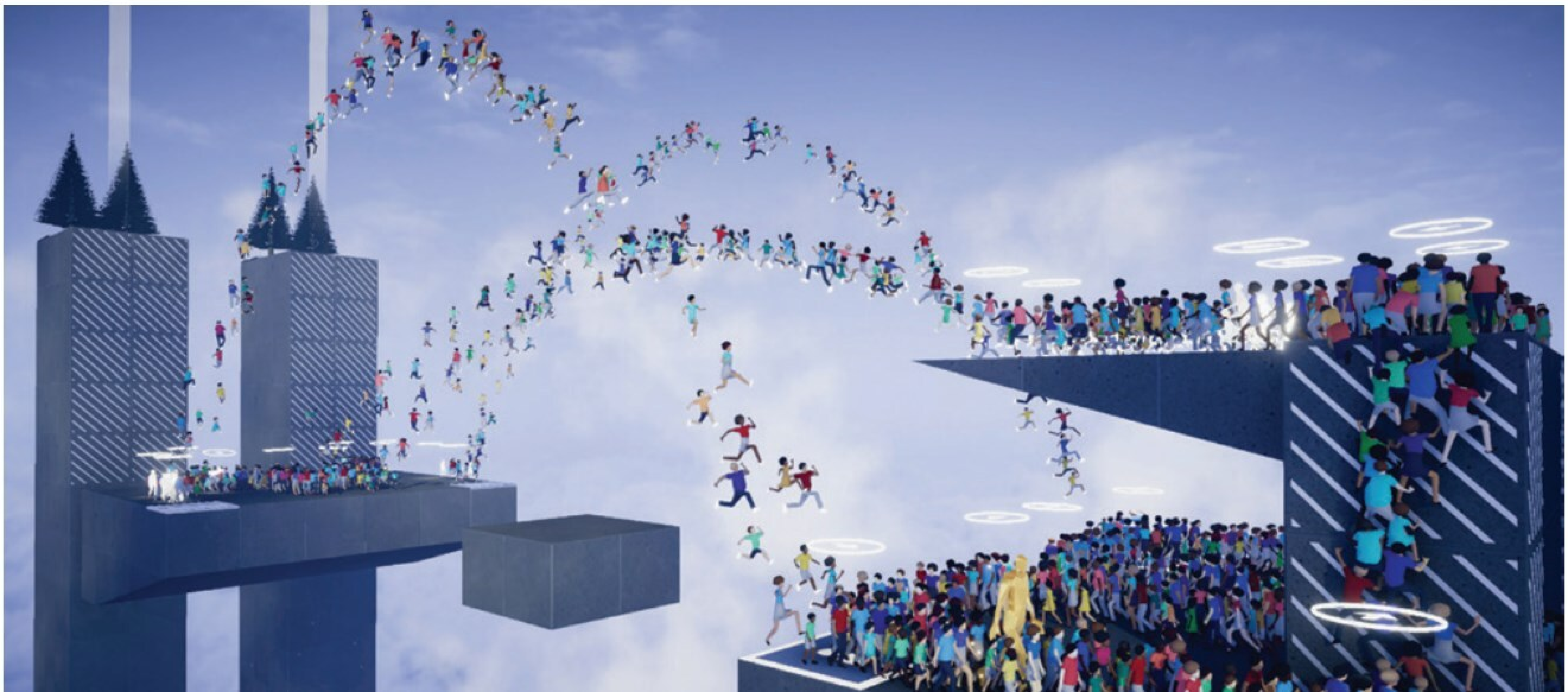
BY ALEX VAN AKEN & BLAKE HESTER

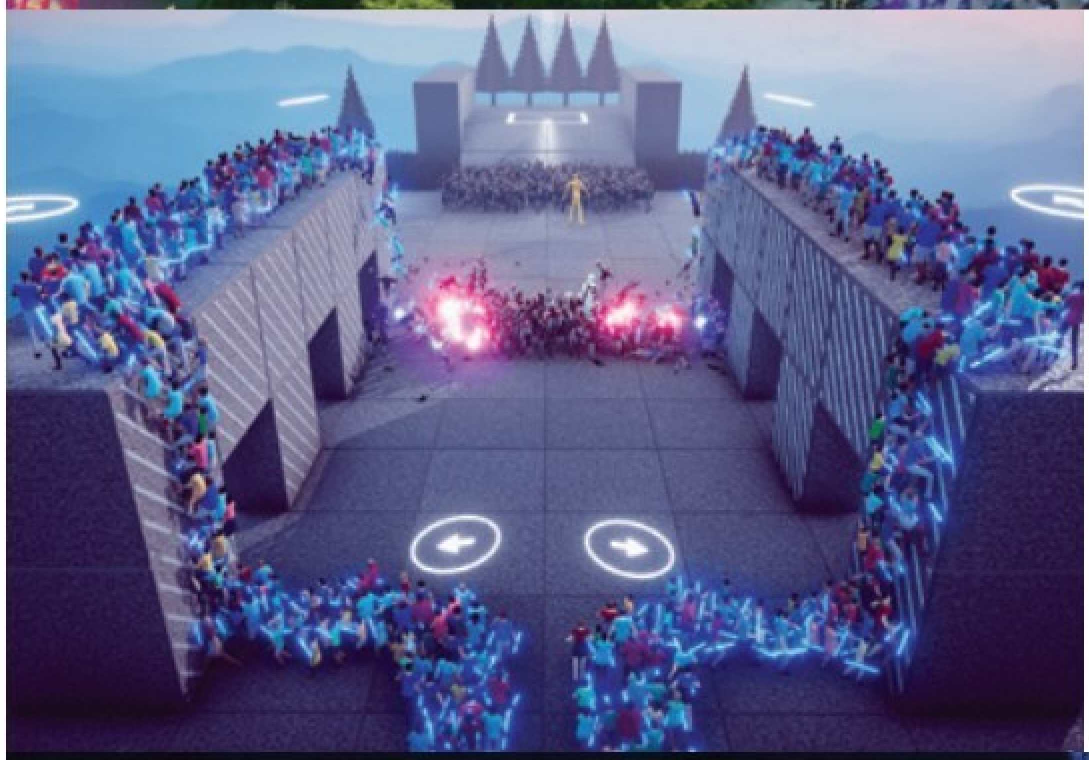
EARLIER THIS YEAR, WE SPENT TIME WITH THA LTD. and Enhance Experience in Japan, the creative teams behind Tetris Effect and Rez Infinite, and more recently, Humanity.

While, on its surface, Humanity is a puzzle game about leading groups of people to a goal, as its name implies, the game's story wrestles with ideas of what it means to be human, the nature of groups, and why we always seem to resort to violence. Humanity's story reflects real-world events, showing us the paths humanity is currently on.

"Soon after we began making Humanity, a number of big events and movements broke out around the world," Enhance founder and CEO Tetsuya Mizuguchi tells us. "There were human rights movements, the Hong Kong protests, [and] then there was the pandemic. And war soon followed in Ukraine. We had no idea how quickly and deeply A.I. would infiltrate our society either. I think all these things found their way into the core of Humanity. That question, for example, 'What is humanity? What is human nature?' We would often talk about how people, looked at individually, are good. There are so many wonderful people out there. But when they become a group, or a nation, or even just big groups, at that level, something happens. It's like a different switch gets flipped. And what you see there, that is what we're trying to depict in Humanity."

Over on *Game Informer*'s YouTube channel, we have a full documentary about the making of Humanity. Titled *Violence is Inevitable*, we spoke to the core creative team, including Mizuguchi and tha creative director Yugo Nakamura, about the project's origins, its complications and lengthy development cycle, and how it came to show us the nature of humanity. ■





Tetsuya Mizuguchi
→

Yugo Nakamura
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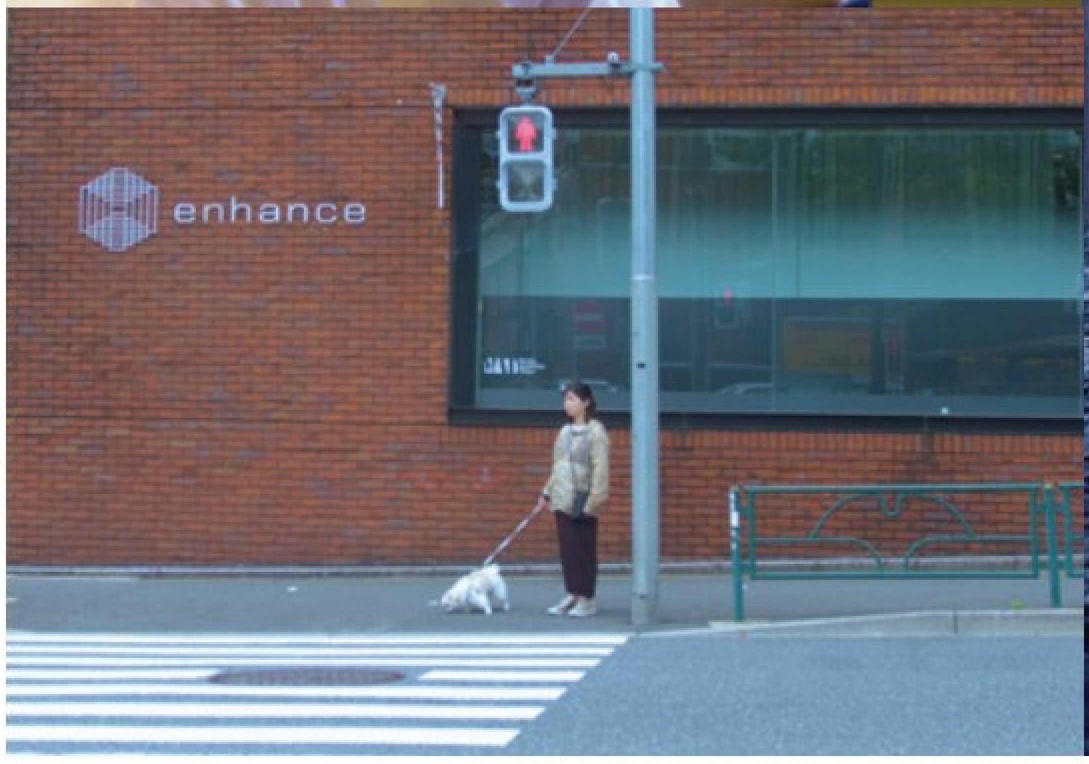


Accessibility Beyond Menus

How the fighting game community is building inclusive spaces for disabled players

BY GRANT STONER

T

The fighting game genre is amid a revitalization. Flagship franchises like Street Fighter, Tekken, and Mortal Kombat have new entries with exciting mechanics. And while players can expect to enter arenas with their favorite characters, disabled individuals eagerly anticipate new accessibility options and designs.

Accessibility advancements and developments in fighting games have grown as studios regularly bring on disabled consultants and advocates to share their experiences. Since 2013, NetherRealm Studios has implemented features in every game for blind and low-vision players, providing aural cues for stage positioning. This innovation only occurred after meeting with members of the disabled community. Yet, the accessibility tools offered only account for one aspect of playing fighting games as a disabled individual. Whether it's casual fans, professional competitors, or tournaments, fighting game accessibility extends far beyond each game.

Avid Fans

Like any genre, the true appeal of fighting games is multifaceted. Mastering the combos of specific characters, understanding the strengths and weaknesses of matchups, and learning how to predict your opponent's next move are all fundamental mechanics. And regardless of skill level, every fan has a unique reason to keep entering the ring.

Kong Lor's adoration of fighting games began at an early age. At roughly 9 or 10 years old, he regularly watched his cousins compete against one another. Born with Optic Nerve Hypoplasia causing blindness in his left eye and progressive vision loss in his right, the actions and movements in fighting games were significantly easier to visualize and process than other titles. After his cousin offered to play a few rounds with him, he started appreciating the complexities behind each game.

"My cousin was bored and wanted someone to play Capcom vs. SNK 2: Mark of the Millennium 2001 with," Lor says. "I was the only one around, and he asked me to play with him. Before this, I would rarely get to play. We went into training mode for a bit, and both he and I noticed that my execution for combos was really good. Not only that, but even during matches, my hit confirms were not bad either, especially for someone who mainly relied on sounds. After that day, I got to play more with him and with my other cousins."

↘
Top:
Street Fighter 6

Bottom:
Mortal Kombat 1

Lor's disability eventually progressed to the point of sightlessness. This change in his lifestyle ultimately affected the accessibility tools required to play. While sound design was always important during his younger years, it became the primary selling point of any fighting game. Lor praises Street Fighter for how it easily differentiates between punches, kicks, projectiles, and even when players fill their special meter. Conversely, older entries in the Mortal Kombat series lack distinctive audio cues, creating inaccessible barriers during fights. For Lor, most characters and their respective actions sound too alike to properly understand what's happening. But inclusive and accessible design is only one part of what individuals like Lor need.

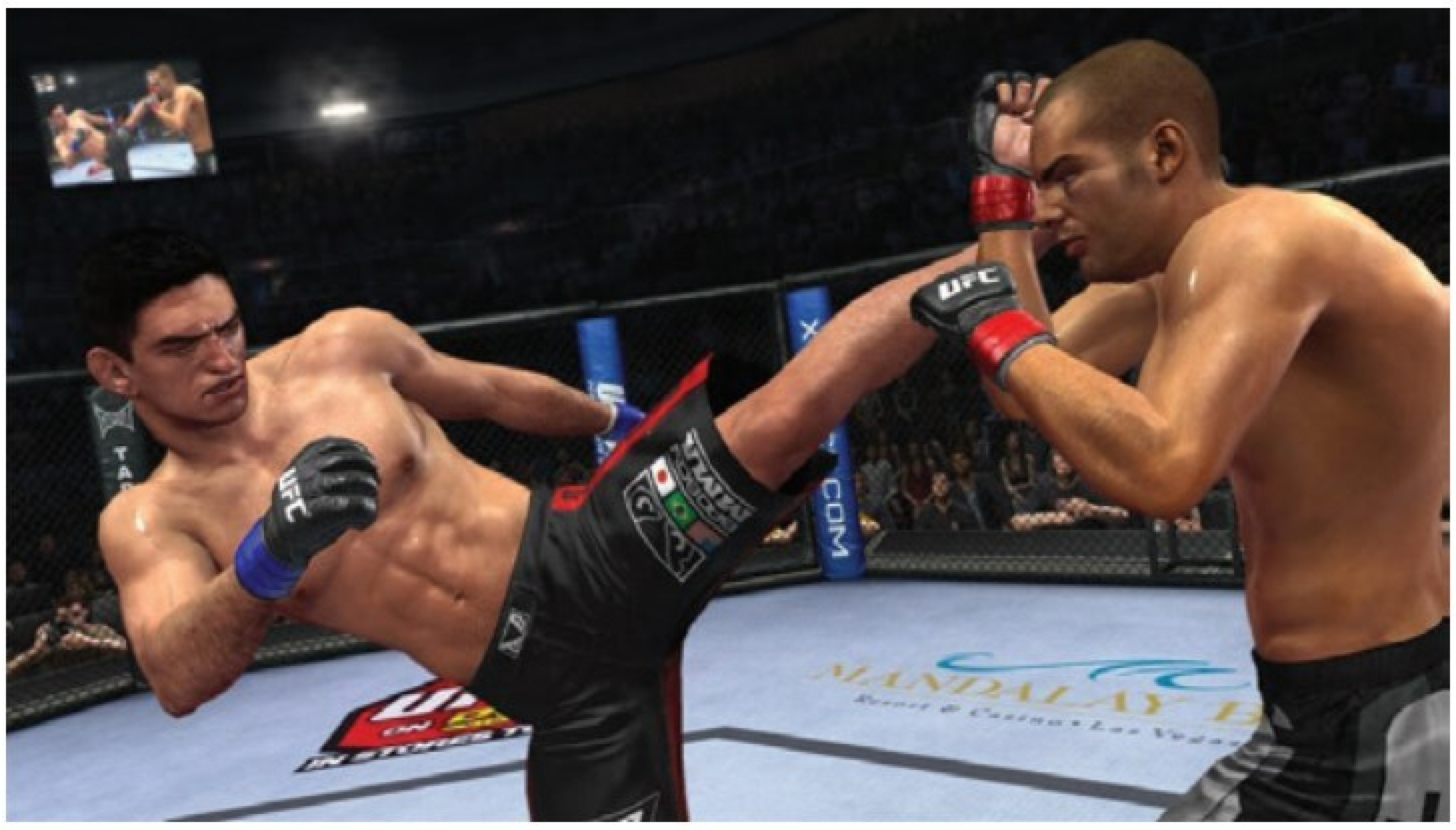
"I also rely on screen reading software to help me read text on the screen," he says. "Menus that are not self-voiced or cannot be detected with [Optical Character Recognition] software will prevent me from even getting started with the game. If I were to take it one step further – if a game can natively work with my screen reader software, that would be even better. One great example of this is Skullgirls. This game's entire menu system and even its training menu is read out by my screen reader."

As developers understand the need to implement accessibility into their games, disabled players are actively experiencing tangible results. Street Fighter 6 includes numerous options for creating noises for attacks, player and opponent movement and positioning, and Drive Meter depletion. In the recently released Mortal Kombat 1, blind and low-vision individuals can activate options that enable audio descriptions for Fatal Blows and Fatalities. NetherRealm Studios prides itself on its egregious violence and gratuitous executions, and by having each signature finisher or super move explained, disabled combatants are included in more ways than mastering characters.

These accessible designs and features are crucial for every disabled player. Lor's ability to compete with his friends and fellow fighting game fans is because of the tools that studios provide. They are especially important when disabled players showcase their skills to the world.

Top:
UFC Undisputed 2010

Bottom:
Idol Showdown
↖



On the World Stage

Dayton Jones grew up loving sports and the thrill of competition. With Spinal Muscular Atrophy type II, a neuromuscular disorder progressively weakening muscles over time, Jones turned to video games to satisfy his desire to compete with others. From Pokémon to NBA 2K, he regularly discovered conducive ways to play before games implemented proper accessibility designs and features. But his first experience showcasing his skills in a competitive space occurred during the launch of UFC Undisputed 2010.

"I found out that GameStop was running a series of release tournaments at various stores, including one by me," he says. "I had about a week to prepare for the tournament after the game launched, and then, it was time. I went, and it was me and about 11 other players in a bracket. One funny detail I love telling others about this tournament is that I ended up playing the loudest person, talking the most trash (in good jest) first. I had to beat him, and I believe two to three more people, and ended up winning the tournament along with a UFC bag and gloves, which I still have to this day."

[Full disclosure: *Game Informer* is owned by GameStop, though our parent company has no involvement in our editorial process]

Eventually, Jones shifted his interests to other fighting games, honing his skills to not only be a better player but also create more accessible matches for his needs. After purchasing Super Street Fighter 4 to play with friends, he initially struggled to execute moves. Jones began to watch varying content creators and learn from their lessons, even gaining inspiration from another physically disabled competitor.

"I was discouraged until I came across an interview CrossCounterTV did with Brolylegs," he says. "After seeing this, I literally told myself, 'If he can do it, then I can.' I did my best to make the game as comfortable for me as possible when it came to the button layout and just continued to work on things that literally anyone could improve on. Maybe a year or two later, I started entering some local and online events, and that basically started everything for me. I could do something I really enjoyed doing and scratch the competitive itch."

Jones' disability impacts not only his energy levels but also the buttons and combos he can execute. On days with good energy, he can play for two hours before needing rest, and when too exhausted, he regularly watches replays of previous matches to understand how to improve. When entering the ring, he can utilize most buttons and bumpers on a standard Xbox controller except the left bumper, left trigger, and left and right stick buttons.

As a result, Jones needs games to offer customizable controls and inputs that combine multiple buttons to execute actions (macros). Without these features and designs, Jones would be unable to properly compete.

"It's great when fighting games allow you to map any action to any button instead of just choosing a preset button layout," he says. "I'm pretty sure all current fighting games allow you to do this now. Some fighting games, like [the] newly released Idol Showdown and Diesel Legacy, allow you to map actions to each direction of the right stick. Other non-fighting games that I play, like Tunic and F1, also allow you to do this, and I'm hoping more mainstream fighting games like Street Fighter, Mortal Kombat, and Tekken adopt this for more accessibility. Killer Instinct has actions mapped to each direction of the right stick as a default option, and without this feature, it's highly possible I wouldn't even be able to play the game at the level I do now, if at all."

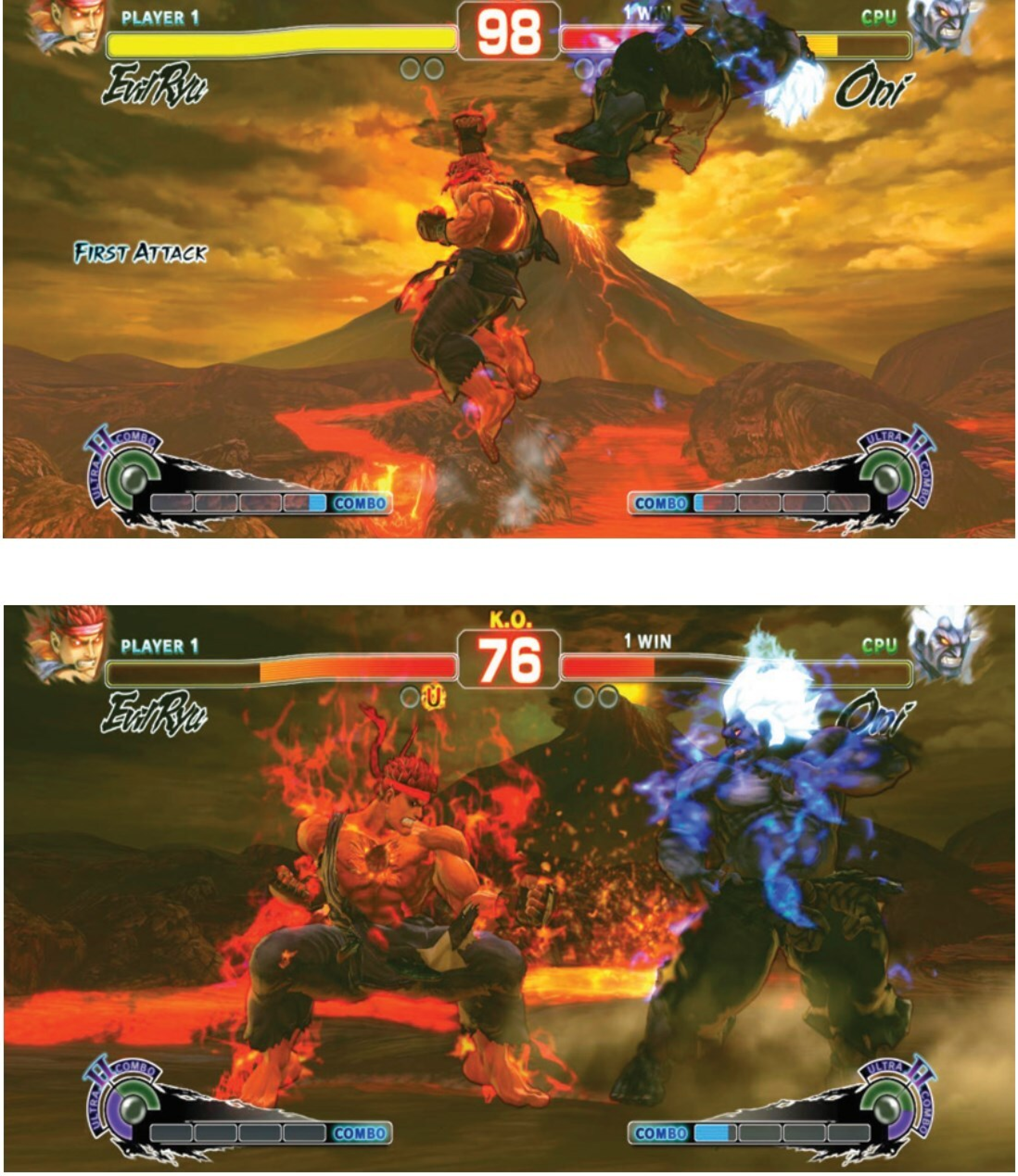
Jones' training, coupled with the accessibility tools offered in games, afforded him numerous opportunities to demonstrate his competitive nature in professional settings. From tournaments like the Killer Instinct World Cup 2017 and 2021, Combo Breaker 2015-2017, 2019, and 2023, Frosty Faustings 2017, 2019-2020, and the Twitch Rivals Killer Instinct tournament, Jones is well-known and respected amongst fighting game peers. Even in local and online spaces, he has a reputation for being a fierce opponent. Yet, it took time and dedication to reach this competitive level.

FRITZ
RORY
90
ROTWANG
RUBY
4 HITS
P2
P1
P4
P3

Top:
Killer Instinct

Middle:
Diesel Legacy

Bottom:
Tunic



Super Street Fighter IV

"I have won medals and placed high at several events, but I believe my proudest moment as a competitive player was after my first major at Ultimate Fighting Game Tournament 10, where I didn't actually win anything," he says. "To travel to a whole different state to compete in two different games – Killer Instinct and Super Street Fighter 4: Arcade Edition – and battle severe nervousness and very little offline practice along with bad results at local tournaments leading up to this event, to getting out of my pools in both games was an insane jump for me and a moment of validation for me. I ended up getting 9th out of around 200 players in KI and 47th out of 500 players in SSF4."

Jones' experiences are largely possible due to developers' attention to accessibility. But to create an inclusive space, disabled competitors need more than menu options. And it's up to the greater fighting game community to accommodate each player.

Building Accessible Arenas

The thrill of competing in fighting games is more than winning matches against difficult opponents. Being surrounded by your peers in physical spaces as they actively cheer on your accomplishments in the arena is an indescribable feeling, especially for people like Jones. But, for many disabled players, events have the potential to be even more inaccessible than the games they play.

Deanna "MeloDe" Rine works to ensure that in-person and virtual events are accessible to not only competitors but also viewers. From captioning and interpretations to accessible stages, competitions without proper accessibility impede all aspects of participation.

"I was working as a stream runner at a major in 2015, and I chose a match for stream, not realizing one of the players used a wheelchair," they say. "I went and asked the staff if there was a ramp, and

↘ Killer Instinct

there wasn't. I was told we could lift the player onto the stage, or we could bring the setup to the edge of the stage. I relayed this back to the attendees, and they weren't happy with the options. They felt that being lifted on the stage was degrading, and there was no point in pulling the setup to the edge of the stream because it defeated the purpose of being able to be on the stream/stage. I completely agreed, apologized, and vowed to do better in the future. To this day, I continue to advocate for ramps or lifts at tournaments that utilize a raised stage."

Rine's work to provide accommodations extends beyond local events. Since the initial request in 2015, they have worked with tournaments such as Frosty Faustings and Combo Breaker to request quiet spaces for individuals with varying sensory disabilities and push for organizers to regularly use alt text to describe images on social media for blind/low vision people. They even assist competitors and streamers like Chris "DeafGamersTV" Robinson with establishing closed captioning and ASL commentary during streamed events. Thankfully for Rine and disabled fans, organizers are willing to establish inclusive events. However, the logistics behind providing accommodations can sometimes create their own barriers.

"Every time I have talked to an organizer about implementing accessibility to their events, the organizers have always been positive and eager to implement them," they say. "Some of these changes are easy fixes, like telling your social media team that alt text needs to be used. Unfortunately, some of these accommodations are a bit trickier to implement. Often, this is because of the price tag that comes with wanting these accommodations. Some of the accommodations can quite literally bankrupt a tournament. If you have a stage at your tournament, it can cost anywhere from $1500-$3000 USD to rent one ADA-compliant ramp. If you need an ASL interpreter, it's about $450 USD per shift."

The disabled experience is often incredibly costly. Whether it's necessary medicine or medical equipment to leisurely activities like finding accessible setups for gaming, disabled individuals encounter barriers outside the lack of options or designs in games. And with many tournaments funded by the community, smaller events cannot create inclusive arenas despite their willingness. But as the fighting game community grows, Rine hopes organizers can directly communicate with disabled individuals to find the best solutions for them.

Accessibility is far more than options locked away in a menu or inclusive designs of a particular game. It's an integral aspect of the disabled experience that allows individuals to participate in all facets of gaming. And with the communal nature of the fighting game genre, accessibility is a necessity across all levels of competition. As the game industry continues to understand and incorporate solutions, disabled players can choose to participate in their favorite medium, not just as a bystander but as a competitor. And for Jones, he wants players to feel welcome at all levels.

"You don't need to be able to perform everything in a game to play at a high level," he says. "Focus on what you can do and what you can improve on and grow from that. You may realize over time you're able to do more than you thought you could!" ■

HARDWARE REVIEW

META QUEST 3

I can see clearer now

BY KYLE HILLIARD

For any frustrations and confusion related to Meta (formerly Facebook) and whatever the Metaverse is, one consistent and more straightforward element of the company's VR push is that from the beginning, its hardware has been pretty solid. The headsets haven't been without their growing pains, but the path from Rift to Quest has been generally smooth, and the iterations have always added worthy improvements. Meta Quest 3 continues along that path to deliver what is, by a large margin, my favorite VR headset, but it doesn't fix everything.

Comfortability & Visuals

Wearing Meta Quest 3 is reasonably comfortable. The straps are easy to adjust and allow you to make the headset surprisingly tight against your face. This is good for blocking out light and moving your head quickly without needing to adjust, but if you're not careful, the tension can lead to headaches. I am grateful for the option to wear the headset tightly, as specific positioning over your eyes is crucial. I would rather have the ability to wear the headset too tight than have it hang loosely on my head. That would lead to a different and worse type of nausea.

The screen inside the headset offers a significant improvement over Quest 2, which itself was a substantial improvement over the original Quest.

Quest 3's screens are comparable to the impressive in-headset screens of the PlayStation VR2. In general, however, VR still grapples with the fact that the screen is mere inches from your eyes. Compared to Meta's prior headsets, Quest 3 is undoubtedly the sharpest it has ever looked. However, it is still jarring to play a game in your headset and then move to a traditional game on a decent TV and see the fidelity improvement.

Mixed Reality

The most worthwhile improvement beyond the added resolution to the in-headset screens is Quest 3's approach to mixed reality. Quest has crucially featured the ability to use passthrough cameras to actually see your environment without taking off the headset since the beginning, but Quest 3's passthrough cameras are full color and high resolution. It means seeing the outside world is more comfortable than ever. As a compliment to Quest 3, I was surprised I could look at my phone and, for the most part, see what was on the screen – a particularly practical feature when you need to quickly check a text or other alert.

How mixed reality will be implemented into video game experiences is yet to be seen, but the included game showing it off is a fun, if simple, technical showcase. Sitting in my office, I watched the walls fall away to reveal an alien planet as cute alien creatures approached me from the distance. Shooting the little creatures to collect them is simple fun and the false reality of my office suddenly existing separated from my home on an alien planet is charming. I'm eager to see how games take advantage of this in the future.

Controllers & Interface

Unlike the headset itself, the controllers do not represent a significant hardware upgrade, but that's okay. Quest's controllers have always been comfortable with excellent motion tracking. I thought I would miss the rounded circles previously necessary for tracking that cover your hands, but their disappearance means you can bring your hands closer together, which leads to smoother gaming experiences.

The Games

Quest 3 is backwards compatible, which means your library moves forward. Unfortunately, not every game is optimized for the new headset. Currently, Resident Evil 4 looks sharper but features light stuttering and other visual issues that unfortunately lead to nausea. Alternatively, Beat Saber plays like a dream. The same can be said of another excellent VR game, Pistol Whip. I also enjoyed newer games like Drop Dead: The Cabin, a wave-based zombie shooter that can be played online, and Runner, an *Akira*-inspired arcade shooter/racer. Resist, another previously released Quest game that received a Quest 3 update, also surprised me with its fun first-person Spider-Man-like swinging in a large open city.

The Verdict

Meta Quest 3 is my favorite VR headset by a significant margin. Setting it up is smooth and simple, the full-color pass-through cameras are useful and have potentially interesting future interactive applications, and the screen resolution improves what was already a great experience on Quest 2. The Quest's greatest strength continues to be that it is fully standalone with no need to connect to a PC or console. Not having to deal with complicated setups or worry about tripping over wires lets you focus on the games you're playing and allows you to be openly fooled by the simulation. If you are at all interested in VR, Quest 3 is the primary headset I recommend.

But Quest 3 isn't a game-changer. If VR has underwhelmed you in the past, Quest 3 won't change your mind. If this still relatively young medium does not interest you, I doubt Quest 3 will make you a believer. However, if you have even a passing interest in VR and have been waiting to invest, or want an improved experience over your current headset, Quest 3 is the best option. ■

B

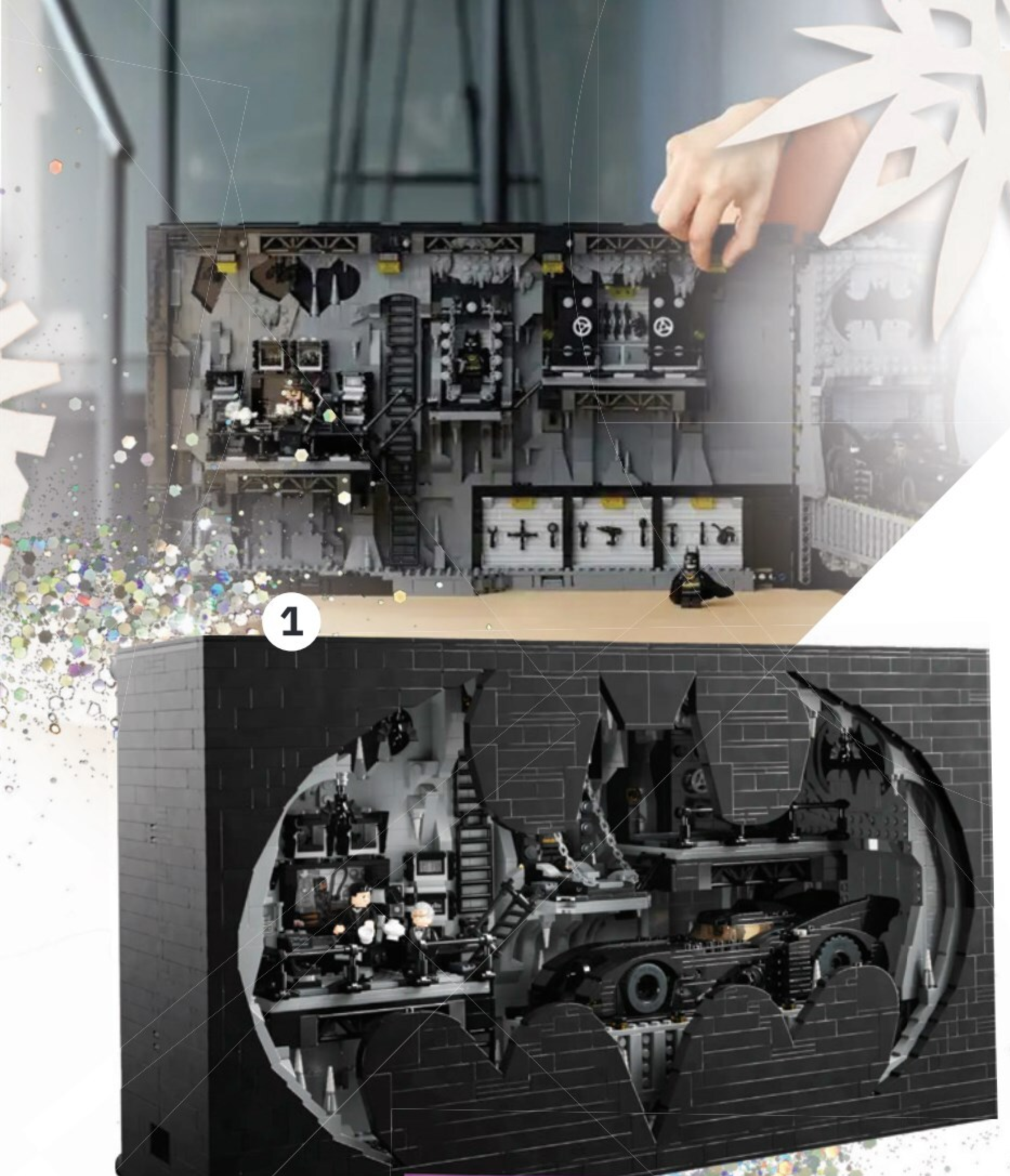
$499 | *meta.com*

↘
For an unabridged review of the Quest 3, head to GameInformer.com

THE 2023 HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE

As we wind down another year, many of us turn our thoughts to family and friends and how we might brighten their seasons with a memorable gift. While the rest of this issue offers a wealth of awesome video game gift ideas, we've also curated a collection of tech, tabletop games, toys, and other fun stuff specifically targeted to put a smile on the face of the gamer on your list. From simple fun to extravagant big-ticket items, we hope you find something that brightens the holidays.

BY MATT MILLER & BRIAN SHEA



❶ LEGO BATCAVE SHADOW BOX

For collectors with a high level of patience, this remarkable display and playset could be a potent centerpiece to any Batman collection. Designed to reflect the Dark Knight's refuge as it appeared in *Batman Returns* (1992), the completed build may be displayed with the iconic Bat symbol front and center or opened to see the full setup. Clever gimmicks include a changing Batcomputer screen, sliding doors to access gadgets, and an illuminated Batsuit vault. Oh, and of course, there's an included Batmobile with its own recessed garage.

$400 | *lego.com*

❷ THE SUPER MARIO BROS. MOVIE SOUNDTRACK

By now, most people reading *Game Informer* have seen *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* and have had Jack Black's "Peaches" stuck in their head. But there is so much more to this delightful soundtrack consisting of Brian Tyler's compositions and adaptations of Koji Kondo's original themes. Available on CD, cassette tape, or two-record LP, you can crank up the sounds of the Mushroom Kingdom in your format of choice or snag the iam8bit-exclusive 7-inch record focused solely on "Peaches" and "Mario Brothers Rap."

$13 to $43 | *iam8bit.com*

❸ DISNEY 100TH ANNIVERSARY METALLIC RUBIK'S CUBE

This might fit the bill if you're looking for an affordable stocking stuffer for that fan of Disney and puzzles. In function, it's a classic 3x3 Rubik's cube, offering that unusual mix of frustration and stress relief familiar to anyone who has ever picked one up. But in form, the collectible features a platinum finish and a range of modern and classic characters, from Mickey and Snow White to Elsa and Woody.

$15 | *spinmaster.com*

Disclaimer: Recommended products are selected by our editorial team, independent of our parent company, GameStop

1

2

3

❶ ATARI GAMESTATION PRO

For those looking for a genuine throwback to the earliest days of gaming, the Gamestation Pro is a flexible and fun retro console mixing classic aesthetics and games with several modern conveniences. The compact 7-inch-wide machine plugs directly to your TV via HDMI, and two wireless controllers include joystick and paddle functionality. The massive list of 200-plus included games features titles from across the 2600, 5200, 7800, and Atari arcade lineups like Breakout, Missile Command, and Centipede in their original formats.

$100 | *myarcadegaming.com* | *gamestop.com*

❷ DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: TRIALS OF TEMPUS BOARD GAME

Even great board games sometimes start to creak under the weight of large player counts, but some manage to get it right. Take this enjoyable fantasy skirmish game that ably manages anywhere between two and eight players. Trials of Tempus plays as a team-based cooperative experience. The two teams of adventurers venture onto the board, completing missions. An enjoyable interaction component lets you aid your teammates as they complete tasks, ensuring everyone stays plugged into the action even when it's not their turn. A ton of detailed minis and attractive cards help the game look good, and the rules are straightforward enough to teach you quickly and get you right into the battle.

$100 | *shop.wizkids.com*

❸ LUCYD LYTE 2.0 SUNGLASSES

Lucyd's approach to wearable tech starts with attractive sunglass designs, with dozens of options for customizing your preferred frame and lenses. But the extra oomph comes from the bevy of included features you can use while on the move without taking your phone out of your pocket. The eyewear can play music, take calls, and use voice-activated tools like Siri, but without the audio barrier of headphones between you and the world. The sunglasses even include premium access to ChatGPT for instantaneous A.I. responses to your queries but without the typing or reading required. Newly launched XL sizes make these useable and comfortable for all head shapes.

Starting at $149 | *lucyd.co*

GIVE THE GIFT OF GAMING

NINTENDO SWITCH
COVER GLOWS IN THE DARK
GHOSTBUSTERS
SPIRITS UNLEASHED
ECTO EDITION
EVERYONE 10+
ESRB
illfonic

PS5
LET'S SING 2024
voxler
PLAION
EVERYONE 10+
ESRB

ALSO AVAILABLE FOR NINTENDO SWITCH XBOX SERIES X

NINTENDO SWITCH
BLUEY
THE VIDEOGAME
EVERYONE
ESRB
Outright Games

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Xbox Series X
Xbox One
SMART DELIVERY
Disney
DREAMLIGHT VALLEY
COZY EDITION
BONUS DIGITAL CONTENT
INCLUDED IN BOX
EVERYONE
ESRB
REQUIRES XBOX SUBSCRIPTION & INTERNET
GAMELOFT

ALSO AVAILABLE FOR PS5 PS4 NINTENDO SWITCH

NINTENDO SWITCH
JUMANJI
WILD ADVENTURES
EVERYONE 10+
ESRB
Outright Games

ALSO AVAILABLE FOR PS5 PS4 XBOX SERIES X

Xbox Series X
METAL GEAR SOLID Vol. 1
MASTER COLLECTION
METAL GEAR
METAL GEAR SOLID 2
METAL GEAR SOLID 3
MATURE 17+
ESRB
KONAMI

ALSO AVAILABLE FOR NINTENDO SWITCH PS5

PS5
ROBOCOP
ROGUE CITY
RATING PENDING
RP
ESRB
nacon

ALSO AVAILABLE FOR XBOX SERIES X

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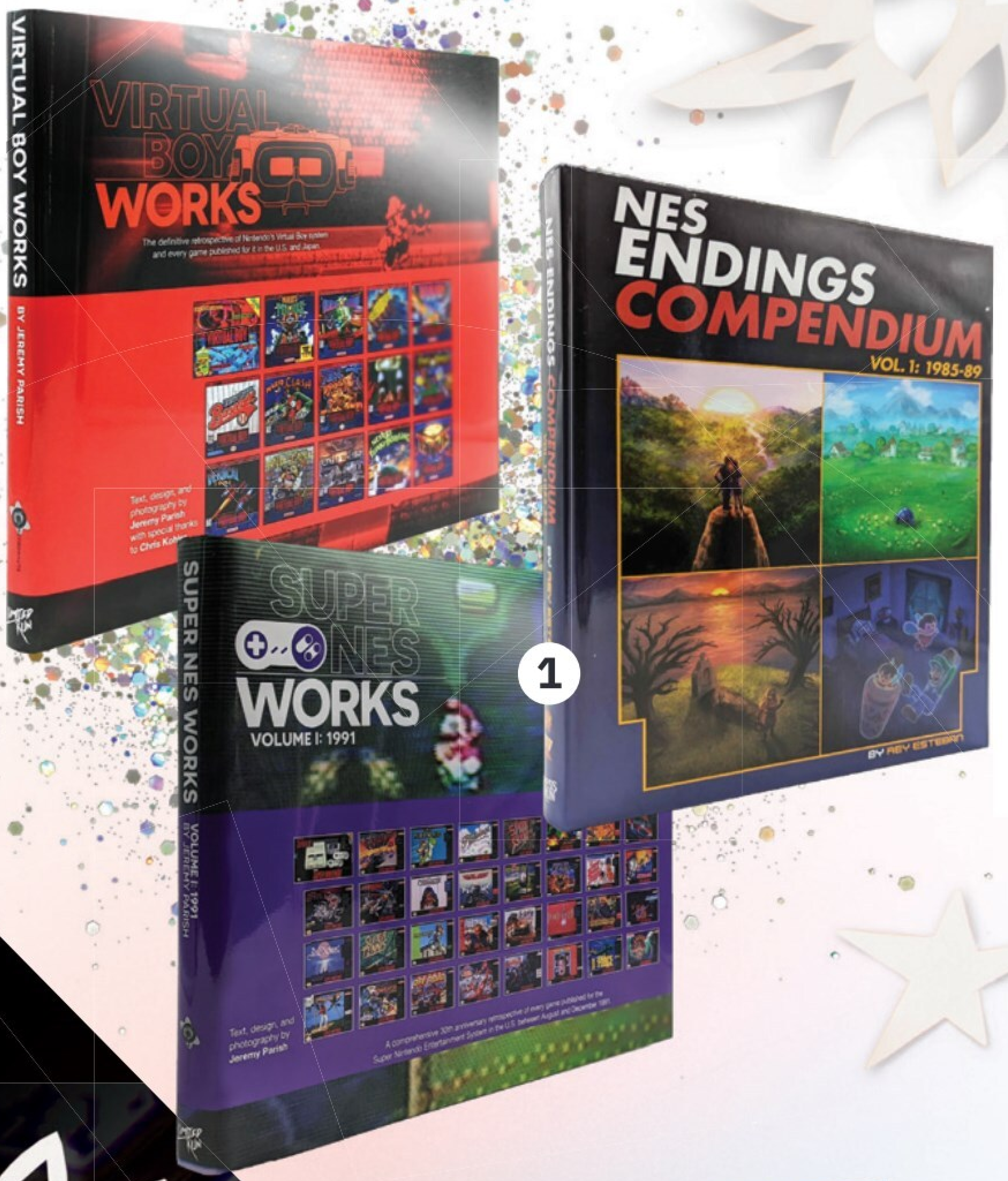
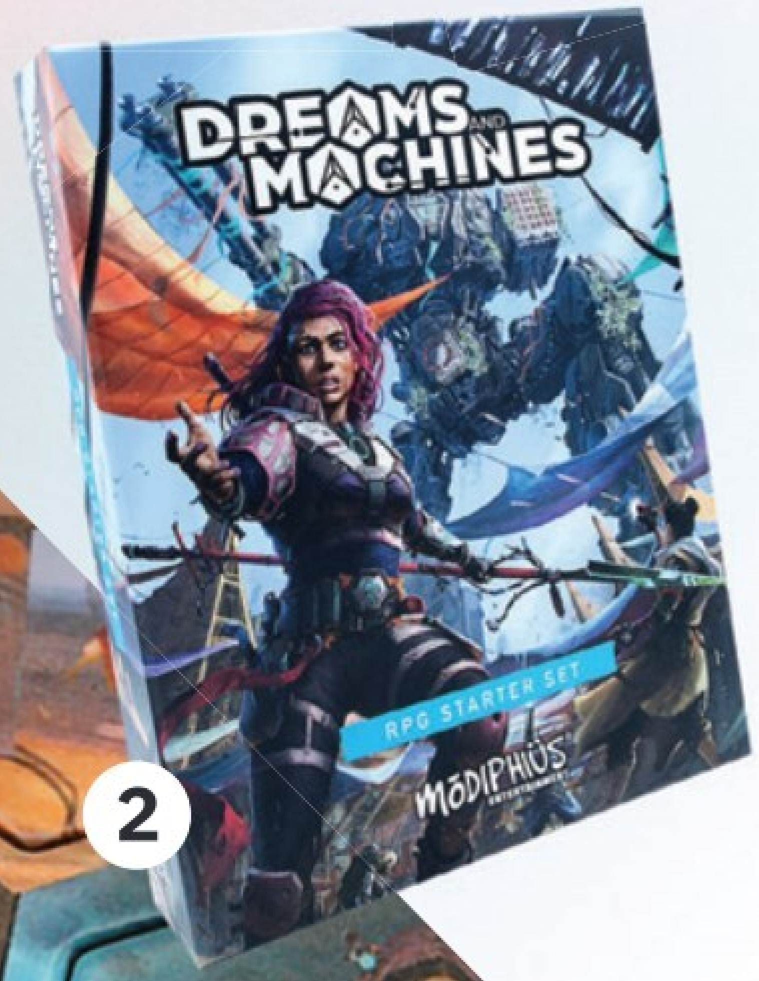
POWER TO THE PLAYERS®

EVERYONE to MATURE 17+
E-M
ESRB esrb.org


VIRTUAL BOY WORKS
BY JEREMY PARISH
NES ENDINGS COMPENDIUM
VOL. 1: 1985-89
BY REY ESTEBAN
SUPER NES WORKS
VOLUME I: 1991
1


DREAMS AND MACHINES
RPG STARTER SET
MODIPHIUS
2

❶ LIMITED RUN BOOKS

Limited Run Games, best known for its physical and collector's editions of indie and previously digital-only video games, recently started a new branch of its business geared towards readers and game industry historians. These beautifully laid-out, coffee-table-worthy books cover topics ranging from looks at the libraries of the NES, Super NES, Virtual Boy, and Atari to a compendium of endings of every NES game released from 1985 to 1989.

$20 to $75 | *limitedrungames.com*

❷ DREAMS AND MACHINES: RPG STARTER SET

Set on a distant colony world hundreds of years after a devastating war against artificial intelligence, Dreams and Machines eschews the bleak grays of many post-apocalyptic settings and focuses on a hopeful but exciting world of mechs, lost technology, and humanity coming together to thrive. Modiphius leverages its 2d20 game system previously used to great success in the team's other games. Here, it is clearly explained and gets you into the action fast. The Starter Set is smartly organized and will have you hungering for more. Few recent tabletop RPGs have offered such a smooth and approachable onramp for players of any experience level.

$37 | *modiphius.net*

❸ SONY INZONE BUDS

For those players looking for personal audio solutions instead of a larger home theater system, the most common choice is to move to a full-sized headset. However, the bulk and size of larger cans can be uncomfortable. Sony's latest entry into its InZone line aims to solve that problem with dedicated noise-canceling earbuds providing exceptional sound in a tiny package. Earbuds can sometimes have trouble separating distinct noise sources, like dialogue and sound effects, which is a big deal in games, but this new InZone model performs admirably. We were impressed with the battery life and the very comfortable fit. For PS5 or PC gamers, they're an ideal choice.

$200 | *electronics.sony.com*

❹ HYPERX CLUTCH GLADIATE RGB GAMING CONTROLLER FOR XBOX

Only a few years ago, quality customizable game controllers were mainly in the expensive high-end market. HyperX is making a case for a more affordable option, especially if you enjoy some flashy color in the mix. The wired controller uses onboard controls to flip between seven colors and five brightness levels across three distinct effect patterns. But it also has functional flexibility thanks to dual trigger locks for short or long pulls, and remappable rear buttons.

$45 | *hyperx.com*

❺ STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC BASTILA SHAN STATUE

Few elements of *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* became such a focus of attention as the double-bladed lightsaber. Enter Bastila Shan the Jedi from Knights of the Old Republic, wielding a sweet yellow double-blade as she wades into one battle after the next. This new statue is undoubtedly the best representation we've seen of the character, as she slices through a Dantooine Guardian Droid while seeming almost to take flight. The 10-inch display is made of PVC and is a fantastic way to celebrate the fan-favorite 2003 game.

$80 | *gentlegiantltd.com* | *gamestop.com*

❻ WORLD OF WARCRAFT: WAR OF THE SCALEBORN NOVEL

Longtime WoW players tend to be especially fascinated by the complex fictional history of Azeroth's dragons. The related characters and conflicts took center stage in the game's Dragonflight expansion, while this new novelization delves deep into the related backstory. Offering insight into central figures like Alexstrasza and Iridikron, it's a chance to go deep into the origins of core storylines from the game, with snappy, engaging prose that makes for an entertaining read.

$30 (Hardcover) | *penguinrandomhouse.com*

WORLD OF WARCRAFT
DRAGONFLIGHT
WAR OF THE SCALEBORN
COURTNEY ALAMEDA
5

❶ PDP NINTENDO SWITCH SONIC REALMZ WIRELESS CONTROLLERS

PDP has been one of the best third-party controller companies of the generation, and with its new line, it makes bold aesthetic choices for superfans of Sonic the Hedgehog. The Sonic Realmz Wireless Controllers for Switch paint pictures of iconic zones in the palms of your hands. But rather than solely relying on flat images, the transparent controller casing includes an actual Sonic toy inside the handle. And with 40 hours of battery life, that's a lot of time to get a good look at those figures.

$60 (Each) | *pdp.com*

❷ EXPEDITIONS

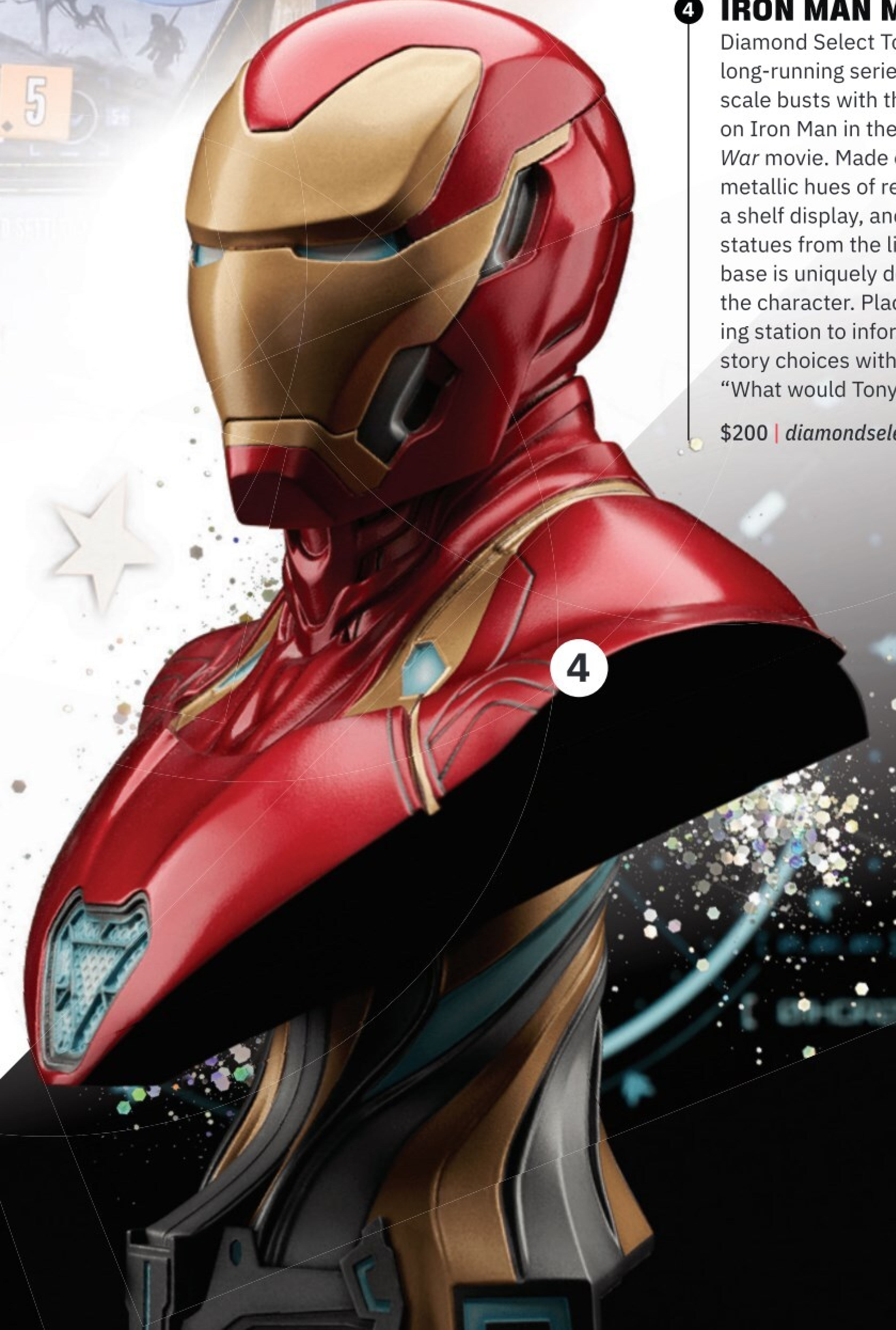
2016's Scythe won high praise for its nuanced and flexible approach to an engine-building strategy game set in an alternate 1920s European history. Its sequel, Expeditions, maintains the stark and beautiful visual styling and focus on building a slowly accelerating engine toward victory, but the card-focused play is a whole new experience. Players take their mechs into Siberia to discover the secrets of a mysterious meteorite crash, but the real fun is discovering the different paths to winning.

$75 | *store.stonemaiergames.com*

❸ BLENDJET 2 PORTABLE BLENDER

Whether you're mixing a protein shake during a hike or throwing together frozen margaritas at a friend's house party, having an on-the-go blender can come in handy. The Blendjet 2 combines form and function, delivering a portable device that can mix ice, frozen fruit, and more in less than 20 seconds (and self-clean in even less time). Blendjet 2 comes in dozens of colors, but the ones themed after TMNT and Toy Story caught our eye for fans looking to express themselves.

$120 | *blendjet.com*



❹ IRON MAN MK50 BUST

Diamond Select Toys continues its long-running series of detailed half-scale busts with this striking take on Iron Man in the *Avengers: Infinity War* movie. Made of resin, the metallic hues of red and gold pop on a shelf display, and like other bust statues from the line, the pedestal base is uniquely designed to match the character. Place it by your gaming station to inform your in-game story choices with the question: "What would Tony Stark do?"

$200 | *diamondselecttoys.com*

HOT WHEELS
UNLEASHED 2
TURBOCHARGED
AVAILABLE NOW
EVERYONE
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ESRB
MILESTONE
©2023 Mattel

❶ GOVEE GLIDE HEXA LIGHT PANELS

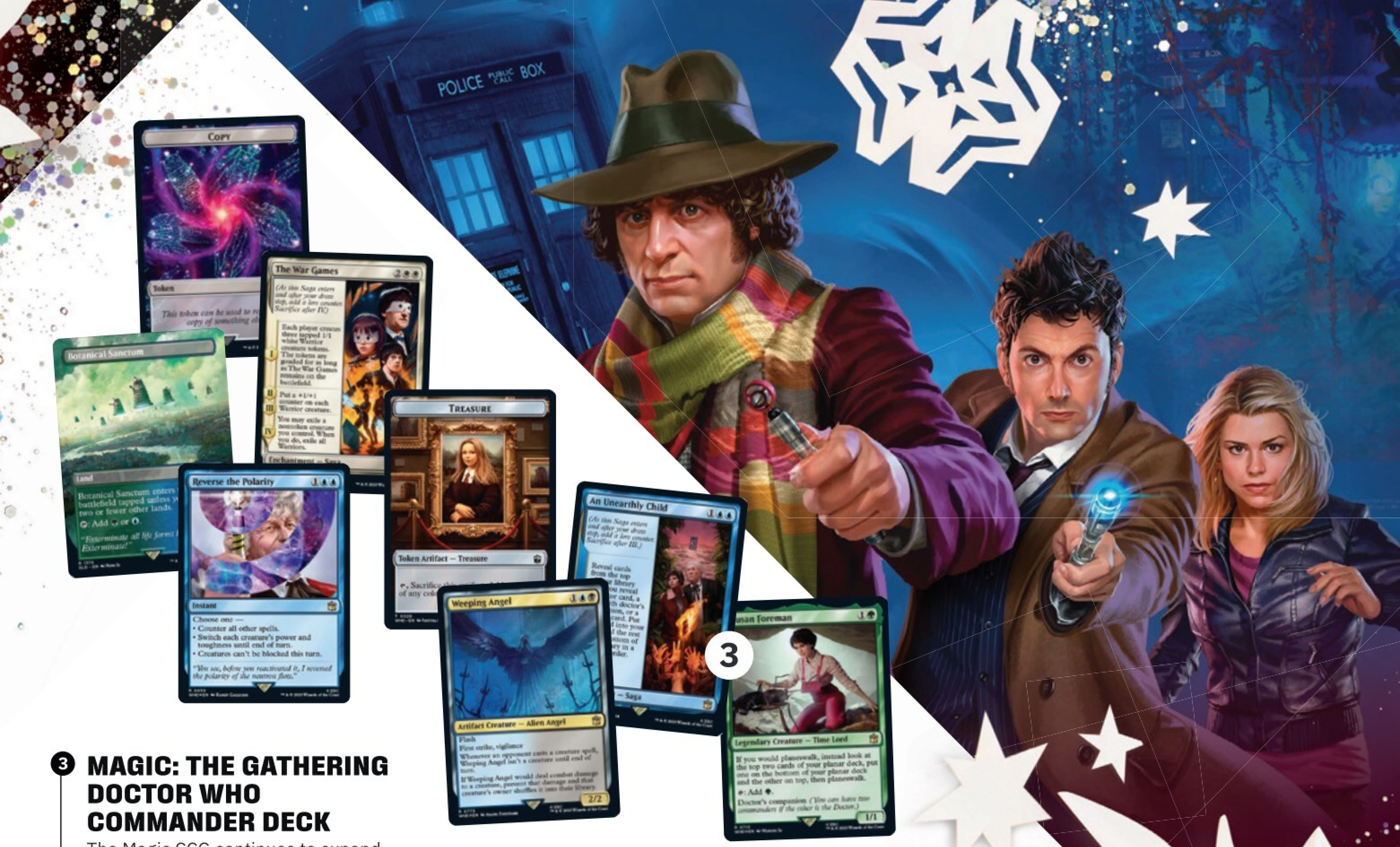
These hexagonal panel lights are an easy pick for someone looking to put together an awesome light-focused wall display, either around their gaming setup or simply as part of a room's interior design. Tremendous customizability is the biggest win since you can arrange your panels in virtually any connected configuration. Use any combination of the Govee app and voice commands to alter the light show to suit your mood and room décor. The variety of available effects and colors is hard to overstate. It's a slick way to transform an entire space.

$130 (10 Pack) | *us.govee.com*

❷ MAGNETIC ROG ALLY CASE

We've previously touted the high quality of the ROG Ally as a natural competitor with the Steam Deck. If you've made the leap to one of these portable gaming PCs, you'd be wise to keep it protected. Waterfield has a wide selection of options tailor-made to fit the machine. We like this magnetically sealed leather case with room for the Ally, and internal pouches for accessories. Simple, understated, and capable of keeping scratches off your 120 Hz high-refresh rate display.

$89 | *sfbags.com*



③ MAGIC: THE GATHERING DOCTOR WHO COMMANDER DECK

The Magic CCG continues to expand and grow in unusual and exciting new directions, often now tapping into other popular franchises. Case in point – the new Doctor Who-themed decks dip into the long history of the time-traveling Doctor across all his incarnations. For casual players, consider exploring a Commander deck, which supports larger multiplayer games (instead of just two-person duels) and lets you build your strategy around a single legendary card. Let the debate over the best reincarnation of the Doctor begin.

$65 | *magic.wizards.com*

ELEGOO
CREATE THE FUTURE
CREATE THE FUTURE
4

④ NEPTUNE 4 PLUS 3D PRINTER

The once-exorbitant cost of a good 3D printer continues to drop, even as the available quality continues to rise. For interested newcomers, the Neptune 4 Plus is a solid value. Several features provide ease of use and quick setup. The 500mm/s printing speed means you're not waiting forever to complete something cool. In addition, the impressive auto-leveling tech, along with a sizeable available printing volume of 320x320x385mm, means that you can experiment with a multitude of impressive designs. ■

$350 | *elegoo.com*

Rite of Pa

ssage

Director James Cameron views his Avatar franchise as not merely a collection of stories but a living-breathing world, down to each blade of grass. The more real Pandora feels, the more invested viewers are in the adventures unfolding there. Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora represents this ambitious mindset by letting fans explore Cameron's world like never before.

This canonical chapter in the Avatar mythos, developed by Ubitoft's Malmö, Sweden-based Massive Entertainment, unfolds in a new region of Pandora called the Western Frontier. The story focuses on a Na'vi, rather than a human-piloted Avatar, in an adventure that introduces new clans, wildlife, flora, and possibility. We flew across the globe to Sweden to spend two hours exploring one of the Frontier's three regions, take an exclusive tour of the other two areas, and speak with the developers to learn how it brought this new slice of Pandora to life.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC • Luna **STYLE** 1-Player Action (2-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Ubisoft **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Massive **RELEASE** December 7

PLANTING THE SEEDS

Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora is coming to fruition thanks to a collaboration between James Cameron's Lightstorm Entertainment, the production studio behind the Avatar films, and Massive Entertainment, the developer best known as the makers of Tom Clancy's The Division. This pairing may feel odd for Division fans at first; how did the team behind the gritty military shooter get the keys to the Avatar license?

According to director Magnus Jansén, the project's origins began over a decade ago when the Avatar sequels were being written. Massive met with Lightstorm several times starting in 2012. One of these meetings saw the film company visit Massive's studio in 2014 to watch a demonstration of its then-new Snowdrop Engine.

Snowdrop's debut during the memorable E3 2013 reveal of The Division was an impressive display of the engine's technical prowess. In the years since, Snowdrop has lived up to the hype; it has since powered other titles such as the Mario + Rabbids games and Massive's other upcoming open-world licensed game, Star Wars Outlaws. But in 2014, Snowdrop's then-unrealized potential was enough to woo the similarly state-of-the-art-minded Lightstorm into a partnership.

"The combination of what we could achieve with Snowdrop, leading to the success of Tom Clancy's The Division, paved the way for this collaboration," Jansén tells me over email. "Since then, our focus, first and foremost, has always been on creating a game of outstanding quality and is based on a free-form exchange of ideas."

Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora's narrative does not serve as a sequel to the two films, but rather a story occurring in parallel. It starts with the Resources Development Administration (RDA), the villainous human corporation tasked with mining and exploiting Pandora's resources. As the RDA was newly expanding their operations, a leader named John Mercer created and helmed The Ambassador Program (TAP) in the Western Frontier of Pandora, far from Hell's Gate, the corporation's primary headquarters seen in the first film. The purpose of this program was to teach young Na'vi human culture to serve as RDA envoys spreading the corporation's agenda across Pandora. As relations between humans and Na'vi soured and turned violent, TAP began abducting Na'vi children and training them more as soldiers and covert agents. That included sending them to human schools, teaching them English, and conditioning them to embrace man-made technology and materials such as metal (which is taboo to Na'vi).

However, during the battle of the Hallelujah Mountains at the climax of *Avatar*, Hell's Gate came under attack by Na'vi forces, so Mercer ordered the TAP shut down and all children executed before they could be freed. Thankfully, their teacher placed several of the kids into emergency cryosleep, saving their lives. These children would sleep undiscovered for 15 years before the game's protagonist, whom players customize, including their body type and voice, awakens during the early events of *Avatar: The Way of Water.*

The sequel film reveals that Pandora found peace for 16 years until humanity returned with a vengeance. However, *The Way of Water* only shows the RDA's initial comeback before jumping ahead one year to the renewed struggle between the Na'vi and mankind. Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora unfolds during this one-year time skip on the other side of the moon in the Western Frontier. Thus, it's unlikely you'll encounter Jake, Neytiri, and other recognizable faces, but expect to hear some references to their ongoing conflict.

Your character is clueless as to what's occurred and, despite being a native, has no idea what it means to be Na'vi. Your adventure becomes a journey to reclaiming the identity that was stolen from you while joining the fight against the RDA and, more specifically, the game's main antagonist, John Mercer. That requires enlisting the aid of the Western Frontiers' three primary clans by learning their culture and reconnecting with Eywa, the organic network connecting all life on Pandora.

"There's an element of a coming-of-age story in it," says narrative director Anne Reid. "The character does have a certain amount of innocence and not knowing about the world, so it's not like an action hero, smartass personality but more like [an] inquiring, curious, wondering kind of personality; a person who doesn't have a lot of experience in the world and is learning a lot."

As an original tale written by Massive, developing a story that fits within the Avatar universe required closely working with Lightstorm and Disney to ensure existing concepts were replicated to the letter while the studio's bounty of new ideas was appropriate to the universe. That includes having a dedicated loremaster on staff with extensive documentation of existing story elements, characters, wildlife, flora, and other nitty-gritty details that shape Pandora.

While Massive has not communicated with James Cameron directly, the filmmaker has provided feedback through representatives to help shape and refine ideas, including Oscar-winning producer Jon Landau. Crafting the story also necessitated getting a heads-up on the progression of the sequels. Since Massive wanted the RDA to be a present threat, it conceived the idea of setting it during *Avatar 2*'s one-year gap early in development, which came about thanks to narrative director Anne Reid having advanced access to *The Way of Water*'s scripts as that film was being made.

One perk about the Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora's geographical setting is that it's so far away from where the films unfold that it's largely disconnected from those events. This ensures newbies can jump into the game without catching up on roughly six hours of movies. For Massive, it also means its story won't get in the way of the adventures to come; Reid has read the scripts for *Avatar 3*, helping ensure the game fits harmoniously in the still-evolving canon in the years to come.

Meet the Clans

Three clans brand-new to the Avatar universe call the Western Frontier home. You encounter each one to learn their ways and, hopefully, earn their acceptance.

ARANAHE – The first clan you encounter that resides in the Kinglor Forest. The Aranahe live in a Hometree and have a symbiotic relationship with Kinglor, large moth-like creatures. Since the clan primarily consists of weavers and artisans, the Aranahe relies on Kinglor's silk to create its extravagant clothing, fabrics, and other goods. Their refined tastes also mean they have a proud, somewhat superior attitude. Nonetheless, the Aranahe is a peaceful and orderly tribe that values consensus over individual needs.

ZESWA – This colorful, boisterous, and ferocious warrior clan roams the Upper Plains. They are nomadic due to the fact that they travel alongside large, docile creatures called zakru. These peaceful animals give milk that forms the basis of the Zeswa's diet. Zakru bury their trunks underground to feed on bacteria in the earth and rarely move, so the Zeswa's tents are pitched on and around their stationary bodies to shield them from the Upper Plains' powerful winds. When the zakru finally move on, which Massive describes as a once-in-a-generation occurrence, the clan moves with them. According to narrative designer Chella Ramanan, Massive looked at Kenya's Maasai tribe as a primary influence for the Zeswa.

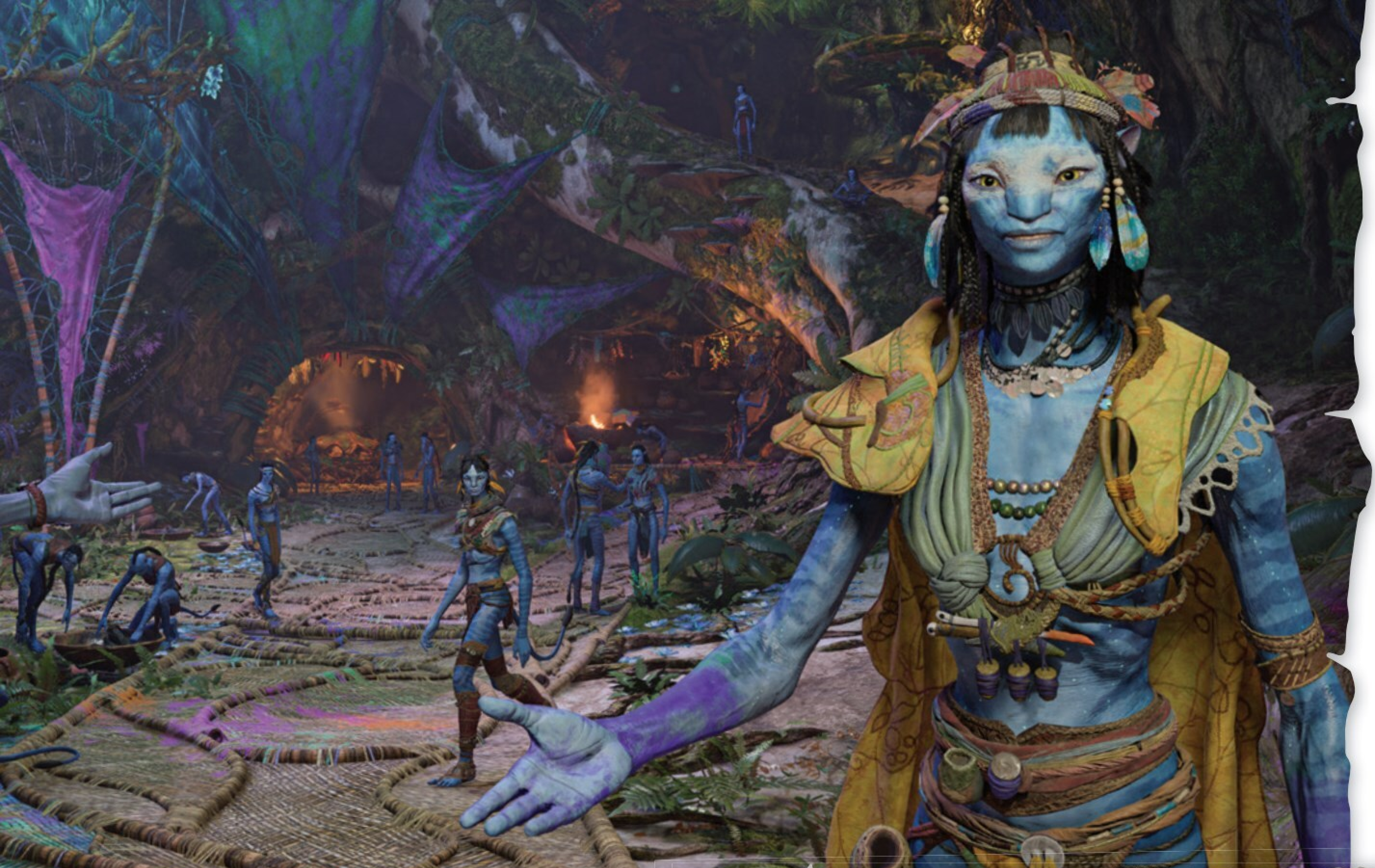
KAME'TIRE – Search well enough, and you'll find this secretive tribe hidden within the foggy depths of the Clouded Forest. Reclusive, introverted, and as mysterious as their home, the Kame'tire are expert apothecaries and herbalists. Their intimate knowledge and appreciation for plant life is also reflected in their organic clothing. That includes imposing armor made through wood shaping: the art of softening and sculpting wood into different shapes. Though less eager to fight, the Kame'tire are renowned caretakers and valuable allies – if you can find them.

BREATHING NEW LIFE

Anyone who's watched behind-the-scenes documentaries for the films knows Lightstorm goes to painstaking lengths to create a world that not only feels fantastical but scientifically plausible. When creating new living things on Pandora, the most important starting point is finding a real-world example, plucking certain elements, and essentially dialing them up to 11. That way, a plant or animal, no matter how bizarre, still feels like it could exist. Massive takes the same approach when designing the myriad new creatures and plant life that shape the Western Frontier.

"Those are the questions that Lightstorm is really interested in," says associate game director Drew Rechner. "And I think that's also what makes the Avatar IP kind of special, is that attention to detail and that thought that goes into every aspect. So, it's really about figuring out, 'Okay, are there examples in nature of something like this happening? Well, yeah, maybe there is, and how does that work?'"

In other instances, Massive had ideas for a creature or plant that matched an unused or unfinished concept Lightstorm had in its archives, serving as a win-win for both sides; Massive gets what it needs while Lightstorm gets to help bring an idea to fruition that, for whatever reason, didn't make the cut for the films. Much of the game's wildlife and fauna are original creations by Massive and Ubisoft Shanghai, and



most of it has been christened with an official Na'vi name courtesy of Lightstorm's Dr. Paul Frommer, who developed the Na'vi language for the films.

Developing Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora's three new clans - the Aranahe, Zeswa, and Kame'tire (see the sidebar to learn more about each clan) first required looking at the geographical features of the game's regions and formulating the types of culture and personalities of those who live there. That approach is true to life; cultures throughout history are first shaped by their environments, and that was key to making the clans in Frontiers of Pandora feel individually unique and fascinating.

"I read a lot of stuff about the beginnings of culture and how people develop things," says Reid. "Like what's their art style, or their dress style, or some of their rituals? And a lot of that gets determined by what kind of region people live in, what food sources there are, and how close [they are] to water. Or, like, what is the physical environment they live in, which is super fascinating. And then we could take that knowledge and apply it to our clans."

Massive worked with the famed Wētā Workshop, which designed much of the Na'vi's cultural art and costumes in the films, to develop the visual identities of its clans. The result is three contrasting groups that provide players the opportunities to learn new skills, whether it be crafting or combat, while getting to view Pandora through three distinct lenses.

GETTING MY BEARINGS

My demo begins a few hours into the game in the Kinglor Forest, a rainforest-like area home to the Aranahe. I'm immediately enamored with Pandora's exotic fauna. It may not reach the nigh-unattainable fidelity of the films, but the scenery bursts with color thanks to a wide variety of alien plants. Seeing the world up close is the reason why Massive opted for a first-person perspective so players can fully immerse themselves in the world's beauty. As if it wasn't magical enough, many plants react to my presence; orange funnel-like stalks quickly retreat into the earth when I approach. Bulbous buds shake violently the closer I get to them; stick around too long, and they explode, spraying a damaging substance. I discover several of these reactions the hard way.

One thing I also notice (and welcome) is the lack of icon glut typical of many modern Ubisoft games. Opening the 3D world map reveals locations, but waypoints are minimal. Massive designed Frontiers of Pandora to avoid over-directing players as much as possible, trusting that mission hints and environmental cues would suffice for locating objectives. This allows the world's art direction to shine through. A later mission tasks me with locating a rock pillar covered in willow trees in the Big Leaf biome situated west of the Hometree. I simply pull up the map, find the correct biome, place a waypoint in the general area, and trek there until the striking sight reveals itself. This more natural guidance is refreshing and fits the Na'vi fantasy of being a good tracker in tune with their surroundings. Plus, I played in the default Guided Mode. An optional Exploration Mode removes most U.I. elements for a more immersive experience.

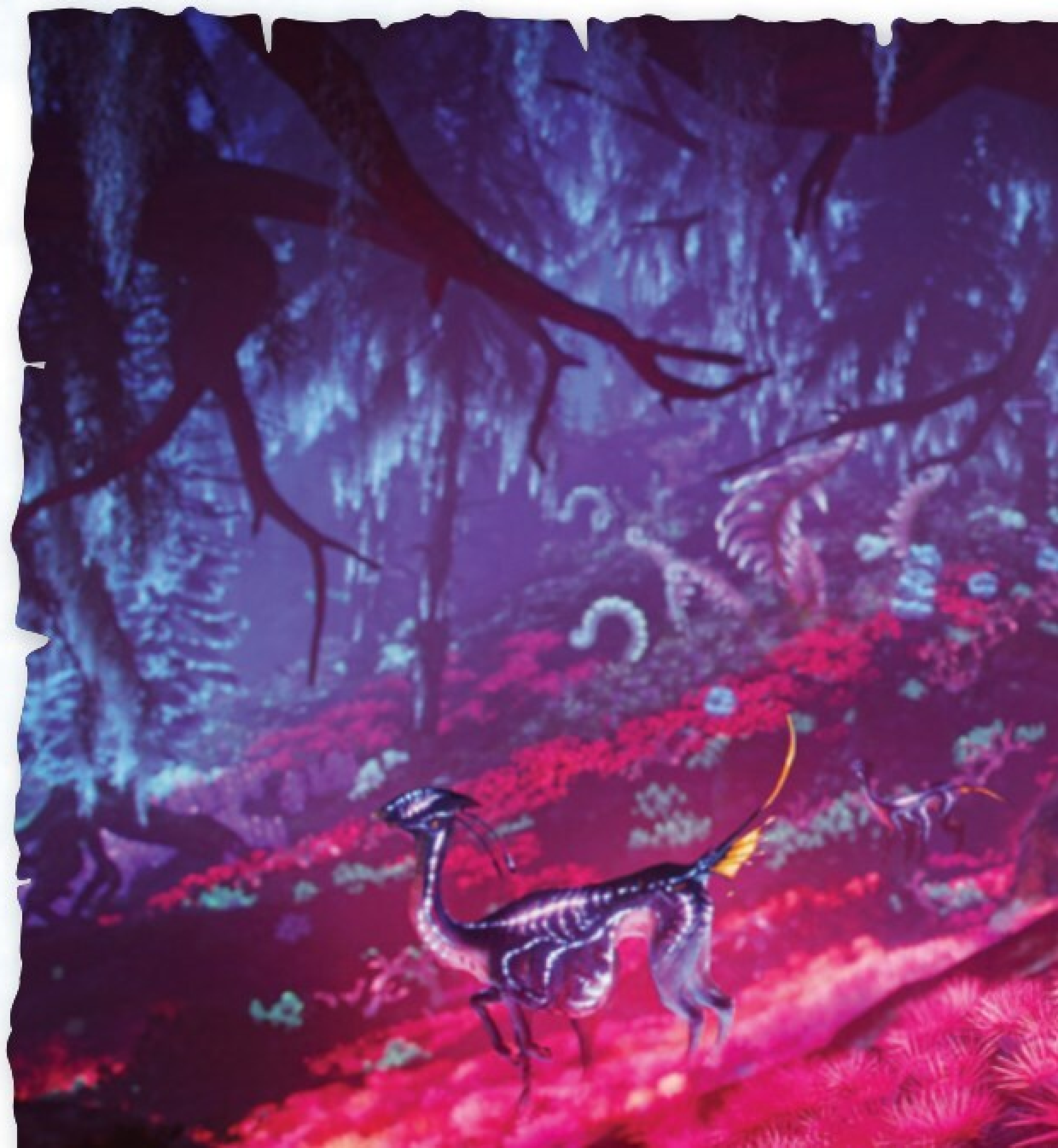
"One of my big ambitions with this game has been to make players look in the world and actually navigate by the world and learn how to read the environments and take all of that in so that we can acknowledge the players are smart," says game director Ditte Deenfeldt.

The gameplay is familiar to first-person action fans. Since players control a Na'vi raised by humans, you wield an arsenal representing both worlds. Various bows let you impale enemies with your javelin-sized arrows, which come in different varieties, such as poison or fire. You also have the Staff Sling , a basket with a long handle (think of a lacrosse stick) used to lob various types of bombs. Your human weapons consist of an assault rifle, shotgun, stun grenades, and, occasionally, an RPG.

Both weapon types are effective, though certain situations favor one over the other. Bows are stealthier, and arrows can be replenished on the fly by crafting them out of organic materials collected in the wild. Human weapons are more devastating but loud. Plus, ammo for those weapons can't be made and must be found while exploring RDA outposts, making them a bit scarcer.

Hunting is a big part of the experience, as you need meat and hides to cook food and craft items. Holding down the right bumper activates your Na'vi senses, revealing scent trails and highlighting targets. Well-placed arrows can drop quarry cleanly and, if you strike a weak point, mercifully, with the quality of the rewards based on these metrics. Gunning down a creature renders it un-harvestable due to the Na'vi's disdain for metal. When encountering a dangerous creature, I always had to decide if it was worth killing more quickly with a gun and missing out on harvesting its ingredients.

Another RDA tool is the SID (Systems Interrogation Device) a handheld hacking device. Pointing



this gun at designated terminals opens a simple but enjoyable minigame where you guide a node along increasingly complex pathways. Sometimes, you must find keys to open new roads or to disable hazards that force you to restart – a big setback given that hacking has a time limit.

Plants can be harvested, but it's more involved than just plucking them. Many have mini-games in which you must position the analog stick in the right direction (indicated by vibrations on the controller) to find the sweet spot. Even then, the quality of your yield varies by conditions such as the time of day and even the weather. For example, one plant may be at its best at night during a rainstorm. You can scan objects by pressing the right stick, which adds them to a database where detailed information, including the locations where plants and animals reside, can be easily referenced. Collection-focused side missions, such as donating inventory items to communal stashes in certain villages, can also stipulate goods be of a certain quality.

Consuming harvested materials fills your energy bar, which governs physical actions such as sprinting and jumping. While eating raw materials helps, cooking them is better. Visiting cooking stations allows you to freely combine ingredients to create a dish that nourishes and provides temporary buffs. The system is not unlike the cooking in the recent open-world entries of The Legend of Zelda, including accidentally making gross dishes.

TAKING FLIGHT

My next demo tasks me with completing an important rite of passage for every Na'vi: taming an ikran, AKA mountain banshee. This requires scaling the suspended, rocky cliffs of the Rookery, where these flying reptile-like beasts congregate. Partnering with an ikran is a supremely dangerous trek, but the Na'vi possess superhuman climbing and agility, and that's on display here.

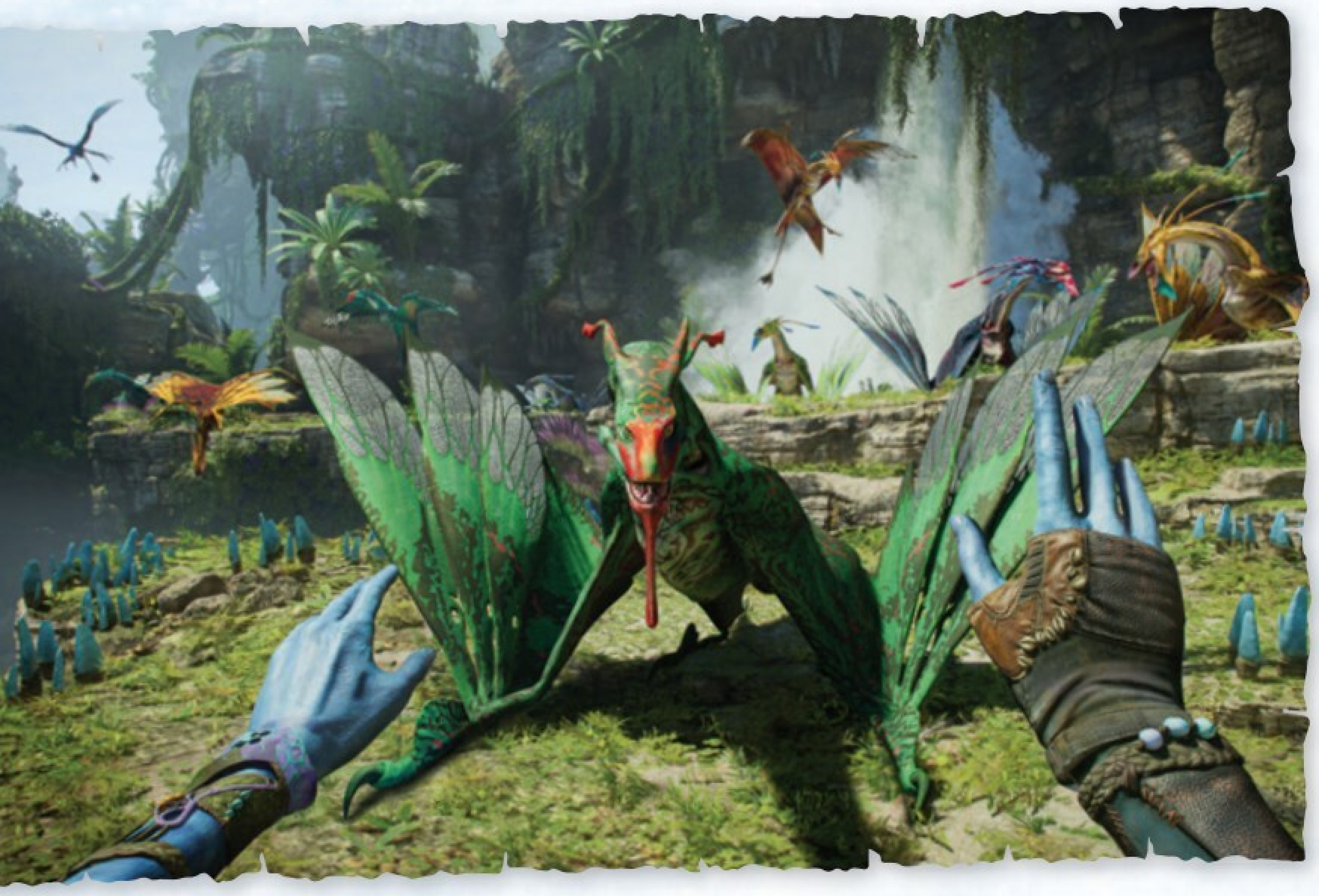
The path upward is like a platforming obstacle in which I sprint, leap, and climb as I flag down my mount-to-be. The parkour-like traversal feels good; I maintain a constant flow of movement since the level design clearly communicates climbing points (without being glaringly obvious), such as vines used to scale upwards. Running over one species of flower provides a small speed boost, too. This makes it easy to plot the next jump without having to stop. I feel confident in making daring leaps across the small islands, especially because players have two types of leaps. Tapping the jump button results in a standard hop, but holding the button down unleashes a powerful vertical leap that I make copious use of.

I encounter the ikran of my fancy along the way and attempt to ingratiate myself by slowly approaching and soothing it with reassuring words, triggered by holding down a prompted button. It retreats a couple of times until it warms up to me enough to complete the customary bonding. I now have an ikran to call my own.

I'm given a list of fancy Na'vi names to give my new partner – I opt for "Carol," and hearing my character say it aloud makes it all the more amusing. The ikran has a dedicated skill tree where you can unlock barrel rolls or the ability to collect fish when flying over bodies of water. Since Na'vi bond with their ikran for life, Massive reassures me mine can't be killed or stolen.

My first flight is an entertaining ride. Flight controls are easy to grasp; pushing forward on the stick propels them while hitting a button activates a speed boost. However, the ikran has a stamina meter and must be fed to replenish it, easily accomplished by selecting food from the in-game item wheel. I have fun flying around and taking in the scenery of the forest below. I eventually spot a few RDA Wyvern Transport Crafts (their fancy helicopters) and engage in aerial combat, which is similar to ground combat other than it being in third-person and having to steer the ikran while aiming and shooting. It's easier to pull off than it sounds, and I enjoy replicating dogfights from the films as I unleash arrows at RDA Wyverns until they plummet in a fiery heap.

For the rest of the game, players can summon their ikrans by hitting up on the d-pad. If you're wondering why you can't just fly to the other regions immediately, ikrans won't go just anywhere with you, at least not until you strengthen your bond with them, which occurs as you bolster your connection to Eywa throughout the story.



Flying is great for expediting travel, but it presents some unexpected potential for performing sick highlight reel-worthy tricks. For example, at one point, I fly over some enemies, jump off my ikran to initiate a free fall, pull out my Staff Sling to lob grenades at the threats below, then call my ikran to catch me and continue flying as explosions rattle below. Creative use of your companion and your arsenal extends to co-op (see sidebar), as one player can tackle foes from the ground while the other provides support from above.

"I think there's going to be all sorts of things that players will figure out, like what you can do on your banshee, that we probably have never even anticipated, which is really exciting," Rechner says. "That's what we want, and that's why we created it."

RESTORING BALANCE

My next mission pits me head-to-head against the RDA. One of their many mining facilities pollutes the environment, and it's my job to stop it. If your Far Cry senses are tingling, it's warranted; the setup is like clearing outposts in that series, and many RDA bases of various sizes are scattered across the Western Frontier. The bases pollute the area, rendering nearby harvestable plants and animals unfit for hunting and foraging until they're taken down.

Though I can go in guns blazing, I choose a stealthy approach. The novelty of sneaking in this game comes from being a 10-foot tall creature; standard objects a human can normally hide behind, such as small crates, don't conceal a Na'vi quite as effectively. Thankfully, since the area is patrolled by multiple AMPs (the RDA's walking mech suits), doorways, corridors, and hangers are large enough to accommodate me.

I rely on my quieter bows to pick off targets as I gradually make my way to multiple objectives: shutting down a pair of drill towers and a large generator, as well as sabotaging a water pipeline's cooling pools.

A GLIMPSE INTO THE UNKNOWN

In a separate, hands-off demo, we're given a tour of the remaining two regions: the Upper Plains and the Clouded Forest. This is where Jansén drops that each region is considerably larger than the entire maps of both The Division games.

The Upper Plains is the second area players visit and is defined by miles of hilly grasslands and powerful winds. It's a scenic delight, accented by the colorful kites and tarps of the Zeswa clan's main settlement. Jansén guides us through the Upper Plains, where he raises a kite to attract the attention of the Zeswa. He reiterates that since the Zeswa are a product of their windy home, kites are central to their identity, including how they entertain themselves. Kites also serve as another natural visual objective marker, with Jansén following several of them to find a specific objective.

The Zeswa also teach players how to ride direhorses, the game's second type of mount. These powerful steeds speed up ground traversal, but, unlike ikran, direhorses are expendable; the bond is temporary, so you can mount several. They can also be killed, so you must be careful.

The third major area, the Clouded Forest, is exactly what it sounds like. Much of this region is shrouded in a thick, recurring fog, where the vague forms of its tall trees slowly emerge as you approach. The temperate climate is very much in line with Pacific Northwestern U.S. states such as Washington. The trees here are more coniferous, and the canopy occasionally gives way to rays of sunlight. The Clouded Forest is also the only region in the game with true mountains. One sight that catches my eye is what appears to be a series of floating trees partially obscured by the fog. Upon closer inspection, these trees aren't floating; its branches jutting from a massive trunk for a wondrous sight.

Since the Clouded Forest is the last region players visit, Jansén is cautious about discussing much here to avoid spoilers. The clan that lives here, the Kame'tire, is a secretive sect of healers and herbalists, and their reasons for being reclusive are one of the mysteries players explore. Jansén does reveal that unlike the Zeswa, who seek the players out and invite them in, the protagonist must find the Kame'tire as they don't want to be found.

Despite fog hiding much of the Clouded Forest, the RDA has as much of a presence here as anywhere else. Unfortunately, the fog makes them harder to spot, adding a layer of difficulty to your confrontations unique to this region. That particular wrinkle plays into the word Jansén uttered most during this demo: contrast. He states that Massive's goals were to ensure regions felt as distinct from each other in as many ways as possible.

"What we've tried to do when we design the world [is] we want contrast," says Jansén. "Because to me, when you're doing action adventure, when you're doing one of these big lavish HD games, I feel that so much of our currency is awe; the awe of seeing something absolutely amazing that you've never seen, the surprise and wonder of all of these places. So that's what we set out all those years ago to look at how can we get the biggest change of scenery that we could."

That contrast also means keeping the gameplay experience fresh and surprising as players continue to explore the Western Frontier. Jansén tells us the Clouded Forest has a particular type of scavenging insect swarm that, after players successfully hunt an animal, will sometimes try to penetrate the creature before they can harvest it. Thus, you have to quickly claim the fruits of your kill before these insects arrive to eat away and spoil it, forcing players to reconsider how they've normally hunted up to this point. Biome-specific challenges such as this keep players on their toes – you never know what you'll encounter out there.

THE LAST PUSH

On one hand, Frontiers of Pandora has many familiar trappings of the open-world action game genre. In addition to the main narrative, side quests flesh out supporting characters and provide deeper looks at the backgrounds of each clan. Leveling up unfolds in a skill tree, unlocking abilities tied to stealth, combat, crafting, and hunting. Some have criticized the Avatar movies for being more eye candy than substance. I can't tell yet if that also applies to the game, but while it has a familiar base, the twists in these mechanics fit the IP and help differentiate it from Ubisoft's usual open-world template.

Massive has another few weeks to see how fans react, but for now, knowing its creations are part of the Avatar canon is rewarding already. While it remains to be seen how or if anything in the game will appear on the big screen, simply knowing Lightstorm loves many of its ideas is the ultimate compliment.

"It is really cool," says Anne Reid. "It's always very cool to come to the IP holders with a new character or a new creature or a new idea and say like, 'Hey, we think this is cool,' and have them be like, 'Oh, that's great. We love it, we think this really fits into the IP we've created, and we think there's really exciting opportunities for this stuff that you're creating.' So it's very fun and exciting to be part of an IP where you can create new things, and the IP creators are enthused and excited about those things."

According to Jansén, Lightstorm has gotten a kick out of seeing its world rendered in an explorable 3D space. "You can walk around it, you can look at it from all angles, instead of just being in the background of a shot – we have it, you can look at it, you can kill it probably," he laughs.

Hopefully, Avatar fans and newcomers will experience the same thrill come December 7. ■

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BANISHERS: GHOSTS OF NEW EDEN

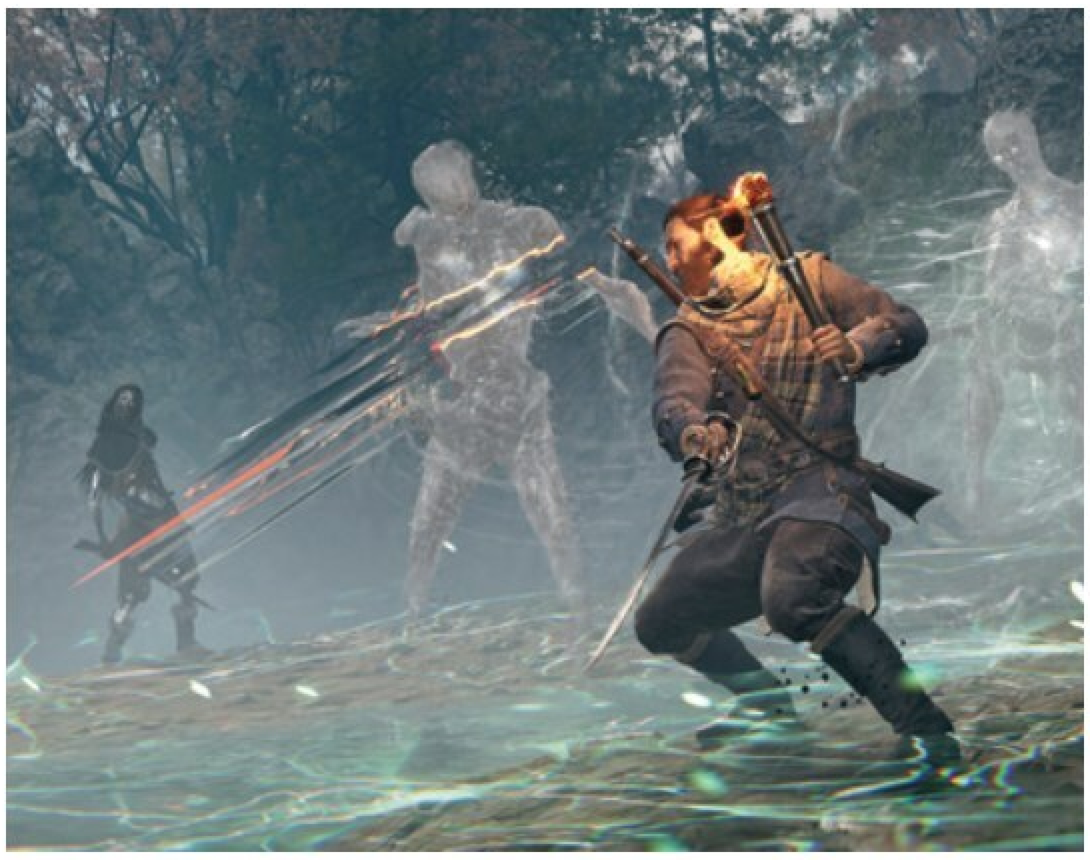
Paranormal partners

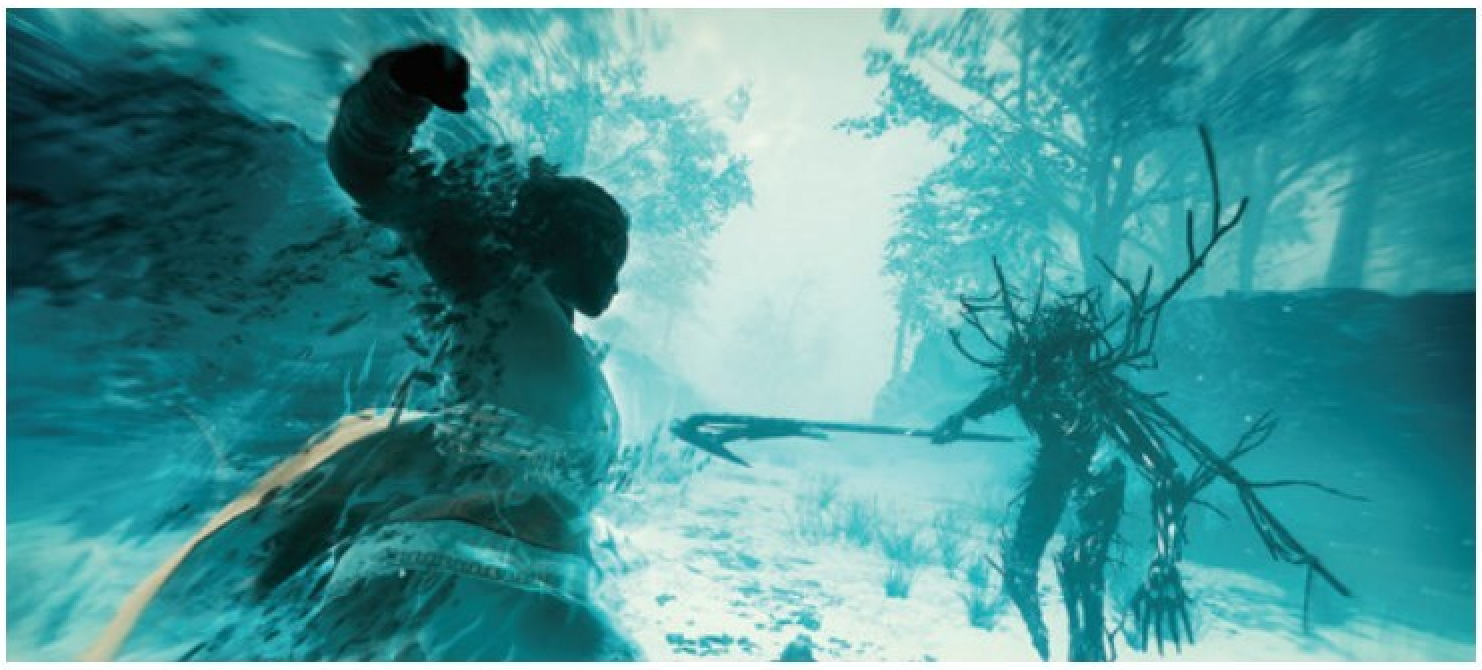
Dead wives are among my least favorite tropes in fiction. It's not the fact that they die that bothers me, but the way they're denied any semblance of a personality in the process, reduced to being a motivating factor in the protagonist's history. Banishers: Ghosts of New Eden avoids this problem, but it's not because it doesn't kill the love interest – it's because her ghost becomes the second protagonist.

Developed by Don't Nod Entertainment and published by Focus Interactive (a duo that previously collaborated on 2018's Vampyr), Banishers tells the tale of Red Mac Raith and his ghostly partner Antea Duarte. Red is who you'll control most of the game since he's the person who is actually able to speak with most of the characters in the world, but Antea will always be nearby to provide advice and commentary. Outside of conversations, she's the pair's gateway to conversing with spirits and can touch certain corpses to see glimpses of their past lives.

The story starts with the banishers arriving at a settlement in the woods. Taking place in a fantasy version of colonial America in 1695, civilization is sparse, and helpful people are few and far between. In my demo, we encounter a character named Thickskin who enlists our services to hunt down a beast that's been terrorizing her village. She gives us a whistle to blow in case of emergency and says we'll need a rifle, which her angsty younger sister Kate begrudgingly gives up.

This rifle quickly comes in handy, as the forest is full of Bonewalkers, aggressive, ghostly skeletons that can reanimate corpses. Red is the partner with the corporeal form, but Antea can still swap in during combat at the tap of a button, complementing Red's slower sword swings with fast phantasmal punches. She has more powerful ghostly abilities, too, like an explosion of spectral energy, but using her slowly drains your spirit meter, and using those abilities depletes it even faster. As a result, you'll be forced back over to using Red, but the spirit bar replenishes as you damage enemies or drink a decoction, which you also use to heal Red.





As I play a few hours of this demo, the combat system gradually grows on me, and I look forward to swapping between the two characters. Mechanically, it's nothing too special; it's a standard, third-person action game. But it feels so cool to tag team undead that I didn't mind the simplicity. As you progress through the game, you also gain the ability to upgrade your equipment and unlock new skills, which will, hopefully, deepen combat mechanically to make it a bit more distinct.

After forging through the forest, an abandoned mine, and some more forest, Antea glimpses into the lives of enough corpses so that we have an idea of what happened. Thickskin was traveling with a group of settlers and decided to split them into two – her faster group would travel ahead, and a slower group would meet them at camp. When the stragglers got swarmed by wolves, they called for help by blowing their whistles, identical to the one Thickskin gifted Red. Turns out, it only summons more wolves. Thickskin lied to them, leaving them to die while ensuring her group's safety.

I reach the beast's home and perform a ritual to summon the dog-like monstrosity made from the bones and the corpses of the settlers left behind. The boss battle is challenging but a little tedious for my taste – the boss's health bar is large, and it takes a lot of hits to bring down. Luckily, I defeat it on my first try. Shortly after, I'm greeted by Thickskin, who has wandered suspiciously far from her settlement.

I confront her, and when she confesses to dooming her fellow travelers (and expressing no regret about it), I have the choice to either kill her and get revenge or let her live and keep her existing community whole. The decisions also have a note at the bottom in yellow text, saying that one will contribute to Antea's Ascent while the other will contribute to her Resurrection, and I'm unsure of the implications of either choice. Ultimately, I choose to spare Thickskin to break the cycle of violence, but I could have gone either way. Decisions like these are something Don't Nod is known for – it did develop the story-driven Life is Strange, after all – and I'm curious to see how much of an impact the choices have in the finished product.

After the decision, the demo ends, and I'm left in roughly the same spot where I began. I'm not fully sold, but I am intrigued. I like the dynamic between Red and Antea; the world-building is unique, and the combat system excites me, but I can imagine growing tired of all three of these elements if they don't get any more complex than they are now. I'm eager to find out when Banishers is released next February. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Focus Interactive
DEVELOPER Don't Nod Entertainment **RELEASE** February 13

JUDAS

Revisiting the narrative Lego

Judas, from Ghost Story Games and Ken Levine – the mind behind Bioshock, Bioshock Infinite, and more – is a game with few details. A trailer that aired during The Game Awards last year showed a collection of unique characters, some first-person shooting gameplay, special magic-like abilities, and a female protagonist (the titular Judas) carrying a hammer. We also know the game takes place on a "disintegrating starship," it's your goal to get off it, and how you approach that goal will involve choices.

Beyond those details, the team at Ghost Story Games has been tight-lipped on the Bioshock successor, but Levine recently appeared on *The Game Maker's Notebook* podcast, where he was interviewed primarily about his general approach to game design. In his response to nearly every question, Levine clearly stated that he was not talking specifically about Judas. The discussion, however, offers some interesting insight into Ghost Story Games' approach to making video games and fictional worlds.

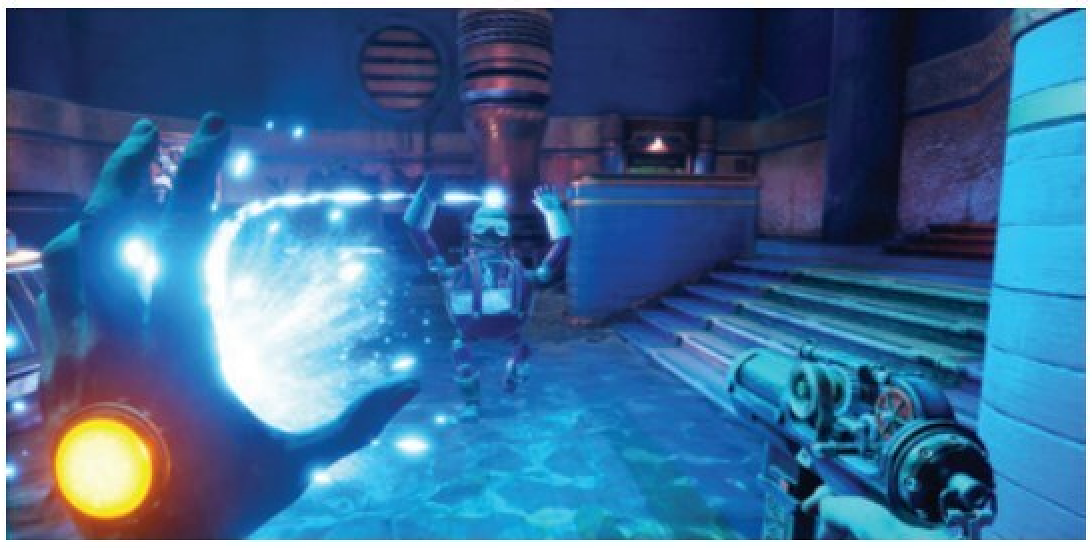
On the few occasions Levine was willing to talk directly about Judas, it was still in a somewhat cryptic, non-specific way, especially when comparing it to previous works. "Judas is dealing... there are some big differences," Levine says. "Some substantial differences between it and what we've done. But there are also a lot of similar things in terms of; we like building worlds. We like thinking through those worlds and incredible societies that we think through in real depth. I want to know how things work. I want to know how the economy works. I want to know how romance works. I want to know how child-rearing works. I've got to know all these things." Levine clarified that defining those elements of a fictional world doesn't necessarily mean you should expect it to be covered in-game, but having those questions answered, even in the background, is helpful for fully realizing a world. "We just have lots of conversations about how things work."

Levine also revisited his "narrative Lego" idea that he presented well before anyone understood what Ghost Story Games was working on, and Judas' reveal was still off in the distance. He has been toying with this idea since encountering storytelling limitations in Bioshock Infinite. "The basics of the concept is about using modularity and not using procedural generation, but handcrafting specific elements and making rules about how those elements can combine to make larger elements," Levine says. "It's a central part of how we think... but I am not going to say which parts."

Levine cited Baldur's Gate 3 as a recent example of a game that had executed a version of the narrative Lego concept, calling it brilliant. He was eager to share the idea early before even applying it to any specific video game ideas because he was hopeful others might take it, run with it, and make the kinds of games Levine likes to play. "I know a lot of people worry about their ideas getting stolen. Ideas don't matter that much. Execution is everything," Levine says.

One of the last few teases offered about Judas came from a question about the growing prevalence of A.I., a topic that appeared in Levine's early video game career with System Shock 2. He was unwilling to confirm much about Judas, but Levine says A.I. is a topic in the game. To what extent, however, like much of Judas, remains unclear. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter **PUBLISHER** Ghost Story Games
DEVELOPER Ghost Story Games **RELEASE** TBA



Eat The Cookie!

CRIMSON DESERT

That's a lot of video game

Developer Pearl Abyss revealed Crimson Desert three years ago in 2020, and until this August, that was the last we had heard about it. But the single-player action RPG recently returned with a nearly three-and-a-half-minute trailer showing off more systems than we can believe.

Pearl Abyss is perhaps best known for its MMORPG Black Desert Online, and despite the use of the word "desert" in both titles, they aren't connected. While it seems there will be callbacks and inspirations, recent details from the studio have made it clear Crimson Desert is a standalone IP. Set in the land of Pywel, a war-torn continent, protagonist Kliff is a simple mercenary fighting for survival. However, Kliff's moveset and abilities are anything but.

We see a multitude of things for players to do during the game. There's arm wrestling, horse domestication, horseback riding, archery, a job board, first-person fishing, cat petting (and cuddling, too!), hot air balloon riding, dimension-shifting portal travel, Assassin's Creed-like climbing, and so much more. While it's unclear just how well all these various minigames, systems, and mechanics mesh – at first glance, it seems overwhelming – the action at the heart of Crimson Desert looks solid and fun.

Given that it's an action RPG, Kliff is quite acrobatic and capable. He fights off multiple enemies at once in the trailer, ranging from other warriors to strange creatures like gigantic walking trees that he must first scale to find weak points. He can even attack enemies from a distance using a bow and arrow, stealthily from bushes and other hidden areas, and on horseback. If you want to storm the enemies from above, you can do that, too, because Kliff can somehow transform into a bird-like creature that can fly or, at the very least, float from high up to the ground below. And there's always the hot air balloons to hop out of as well. You can even light an enemy on fire, pick them up, and throw them at another enemy.

If you can think of it, it seems Crimson Desert's action might allow it. It looks exciting and promising, but without going hands-on with it, it's impossible to say how it feels, which is most important in a game like this.

Beyond the combat, though, exploration looks wondrous. The world looks expansive, with caverns below, lush lands atop them, and floating castle-like structures in the skies above. And using Kliff's bird-like abilities, it seems traversing between the layers of this world will be a breeze. The overall package looks beautiful, too, with the sun shimmering off the shield on Kliff's back, blood spurting across battlefields, and a draw distance teasing mysterious locations across the expanse. I almost want to say Crimson Desert looks too good to be true. But Pearl Abyss is a proven team, with Black Desert Online being easily one of the prettiest MMORPGs out there. And that game's world is quite large, too, so the scale of Pywel in Crimson Desert trailers at least seems plausible.

It helps that Pearl Abyss developed a new proprietary next-generation engine called "BlackSpace Engine" to create Crimson Desert. Pearl Abyss says it's also aiming for a global simultaneous release, and studio CEO Jin-Young Heo stated earlier this year that the team is expecting a fall 2023 release window.

The latest showing of Crimson Desert didn't mention this window, but it's still possible we will play the game later this year. We certainly hope to because it looks like it's shaping up to be a great action RPG. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action/Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Pearl Abyss **DEVELOPER** Pearl Abyss
RELEASE TBA

FINAL FANTASY XIV: DAWNTRAIL

Another new beginning

During this year's Final Fantasy XIV Fan Festival, publisher Square Enix and developer Creative Business Unit III revealed the long-running MMO's next expansion, Dawntrail. They did so with a cinematic trailer, showcasing the impressive visuals CBUIII has pumped out across various FFXIV expansions and its recent single-player RPG, Final Fantasy XVI. Dawntrail acts as the 7.0 expansion for the MMO, which has been running since 2013 with its A Realm Reborn revival.

If you've kept up with the game, you know its 2021 expansion, Endwalker, wrapped up the arc that began with FFXIV's 1.0 version; Hydaelyn and Zodiark's story has ended. FFXIV director Naoki Yoshida says Dawntrail is "our first step into a new story," noting it represents a significant shift from the previous expansion. If Endwalker was tense, dark, and saga-ending, then Dawntrail is the summer vacation the Warriors of Light – the players – deserve.

In Dawntrail, the Warriors of Light, Alphinaud, Alisaie, and Erenville embark on a journey across the Indigo Deep to reach Yok Tural, the tropical "New World" location where the expansion occurs. It's west of Eorzea, where much of the FFXIV action has taken place for the past decade, and is home to many cities that live alongside nature. As for what brings players to Yok Tural, Gulool Ja Ja, a two-headed Mamool Ja, is holding a contest to determine who will succeed him in the city of Tuliyollal. This is the central city of the Dawntrail expansion, and it's a city that prioritizes living with nature, so it's a lot less industrialized than other FFXIV locales.

There's also the mountainous Urqopacha region, home to "peoples both exceedingly large and unusually small in nature," according to Square Enix. And Yak Tel is Yok Tural's forest region, accessible via a flight over the land's southeastern mountains. "So dense is its foliage that the forest floor sees little sunlight; home to the primary settlements of Tural's Hrothgar and Mamool Ja, and replete with stunning cenotes harboring cerulean ponds and springs," Square says.

Each of these locations falls in line with the expansion's tropical visuals, and it's a decidedly brighter area of the world than where players have previously visited. With it being the start of a new storyline for the MMO, it will likely be an excellent place for newcomers to begin, although FFXIV veterans are sure to be rewarded for the knowledge of this world they bring into Dawntrail.

Mechanically, Dawntrail promises a lot. The level cap will increase from 90 to 100, two new jobs will be added in the form of an unnamed ranged magical DPS and the dual-blade Viper DPS Job, new dungeons and raids will go into rotation, and players will find plenty of new gear and recipes for crafting.

One of the most significant additions to FFXIV with Dawntrail is eyeglasses – holding for applause. But seriously, CBUIII is adding eyeglasses to the game as equippable gear alongside headgear, and it was one of the announcements that got the biggest applause during Fan Fest. Players have been asking for years for a way to have their character wear glasses, perhaps like them. Plus, for the fashion-obsessed warriors, Dawntrail will allow you to apply two different dyes to a single gear piece, doubling the possibilities.

If you've been waiting for the right time to jump into FFXIV, Dawntrail is likely it. Additionally, as part of an upcoming patch, the base game, the Heavensward expansion, and the Stormblood expansion will be free to all players. Plus, an Xbox Series X/S version is joining the already-existing PlayStation and PC versions in spring. There's plenty of time to catch up, though, because Dawntrail isn't due out until sometime next summer. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player MMO (24-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Square Enix **DEVELOPER** Creative Business Unit III **RELEASE** Summer

DRAGON'S DOGMA 2

More of a great thing

Dragon's Dogma was one of the most unique RPGs released during the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 era, and it maintained that title with its Dark Arisen port for the next generation of consoles. Just ask someone who's played it – the people who love Dragon's Dogma really love Dragon's Dogma. A Western RPG developed by Japan-based Capcom, Dragon's Dogma mixes the ideas of its action franchises, especially Monster Hunter, with the standard RPG tropes, cliches, and mechanics of what studios like Bethesda and BioWare were doing then, themselves inspired by Dungeons & Dragons.

At a glance, Dragon's Dogma doesn't look special. Its setting, story, characters, proper nouns, and most everything else are standard for the fantasy RPG. But it's the combat that sings, separating it from its competitors. The highlight is the ability to mount and climb enemies, particularly large ones, to attack critical hit points. And you do so with A.I. companions called Pawns while growing your Vocation, or class, to expand to new advanced ones.

With the surprise reveal of Dragon's Dogma 2 last year, it was clear Capcom's sequel isn't looking to do anything too different. A recent look at gameplay also reaffirms that. Dragon's Dogma 2 is more Dragon's Dogma but prettier, and the entire package looks great.

Players begin their journey by selecting one of four vocations: Fighter, Archer, Mage, or Thief. Each of these does what you expect, but as you advance through the game, they can be pushed into Advanced Vocation territory, turning a Mage into a Mystic Spearhand that uses a Duospear for close-range attacks and Magick for long-range damage, for example. Players can use Magick in Dragon's Dogma 2 to take down enemies or as support for healing, blocking incoming attacks, or bolstering Pawns. The Archer can become a Magick Archer, adding magical arrows to their arsenal. Plus, the Magick Archer unlocks a powerful spell that can damage several enemies over a wide area at the cost of their own HP.

Players begin their adventure in Vermund, with its lush meadows and rolling hills, where the Arisen, who have slayed a dragon, rule as kings for generations. But exploration eventually leads to Battahl, which the Beastren call home. Here, players find more diverse biomes and monsters to encounter. There are small goblins to attack, giant Cyclops to take down (skilled players can climb up its back to attack its singular eye directly), and harpies to slash at. Some enemies might even take you for a ride high into the sky as you climb their back, leaving you to deliver a killing blow from the clouds above.

I distinctly remember the challenge of the original Dragon's Dogma. Fast-traveling wasn't as easy as other games where I could click a spot on a map and teleport there. You have to purchase an expensive one-time-use Ferrystone, or find one, to fast-travel. At night, my screen was essentially pitch black, with only the light of a lantern offering illumination just a few feet ahead of me. Combat was harsh and sometimes unforgiving. If the latest gameplay dive is any indication, that challenge is still present.

Dragon's Dogma 2 doesn't seem to be a transformative sequel but rather a smart one. It puts the best of its predecessor front and center again, this time with a more visually stunning world, to hopefully bring more adventurers into Capcom's take on the Western RPG. While the first one has sold more than 7 million copies, it still feels like a forgotten relic of the previous generations, and I hope Dragon's Dogma 2 shows newcomers why its community loves this series so much. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Capcom **DEVELOPER** Capcom **RELEASE** 2024

FROSTPUNK 2

Cold, like Minnesota

The first Frostpunk takes place during the end of the world. It asks the player to make hard decisions for the survival of a city. But what happens if you survive? As game co-director and design director Jakub Stokalski says in a prepared presentation, this question is at the heart of Frostpunk 2.

Unfortunately, we don't see Frostpunk 2's story mode. Rather, we were shown what developer-publisher 11 Bit Studios calls the Utopia Builder, its take on a sandbox mode.

Players start by choosing their starting community – in our case, "Engineers and Foragers" – and a map. We start with a city, and a text prompt tells us we must supply our citizens with more shelter and food. Notably, our city is about the size of one we might have at the end of a run in the first game. However, as Stokalski tells us, this, in fact, is not actually a city. It's just one district in a metropolis we'll build out. A menu shows us we can create Housing, Food, Extraction, and Industrial districts, which require resources and a workforce.

We build out our housing districts to supply more shelter and then a food district to keep those people fed. As we build, we learn Frostpunk's timescale has been moved to a weekly, monthly, and yearly structure. The economy, too, has been reworked to include a supply and demand system for the city's needs (think how our people needed food and shelter).

Very quickly, our city expands – so much so that we run up against the harsh frost surrounding us. So, we use an Icebreaker to push back on the land, making more space for our city to sprawl outward.

We're not just building districts, though. We also add individual, important buildings, which Stokalski likens to modifiers for our city. In the demo, we add a Research Institute, which allows us to use one of Frostpunk 2's most important systems: the idea tree.

The idea tree gives us different ideas for solutions to problems in our city. In our specific case, we're trying to figure out "How do we produce more food?" If we ask the Engineering community, they will push for technological solutions such as chemical processes allowing the production of fertilizers and so on. The Foragers, on the other hand, suggest using human excrement as a fertilizer. Stokalski chooses the crappy option, siding with the Foragers.

The Foragers create a "Biowaste Drum Hothouse." We build it in a food district and get to work. By this point, we've gotten our city into a stable position. We're doing well.

But maybe not so well. As it turns out, Foragers use child labor in our fancy new poop house. Newton Wolfe, an 8-year-old Biowaste Drum Operator, complains about the working conditions at the Hothouse. "Tension grows due to unregulated issue of child labor," the game tells us – and then, punishment.

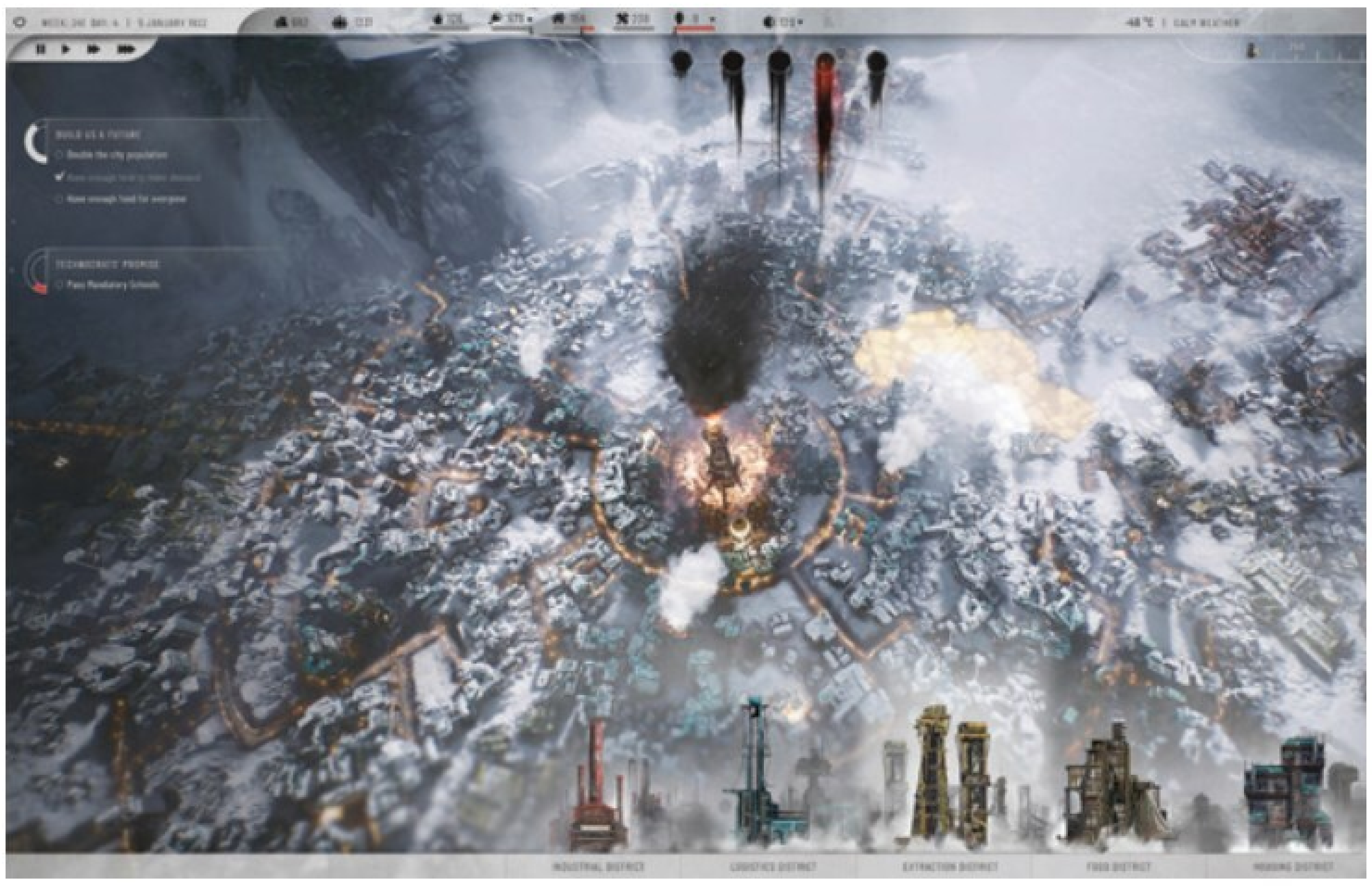
Our Child Hothouse Workers start getting sick with dysentery. People in our city are angry. We're offered two options: "Express Sympathy" or "Offer Compensation." Our choices got us here, now it's up to us to handle it. We decide to offer compensation, but I'll stop short of revealing anything more.

We only see 30 minutes or so of Frostpunk 2, but it's clear each playthrough has a vast web of consequences that can arise from any one action. As of right now, the game doesn't have a firm release date, but 11 Bit Studios is targeting sometime next year. Good luck out there in the snow.

BY BLAKE HESTER

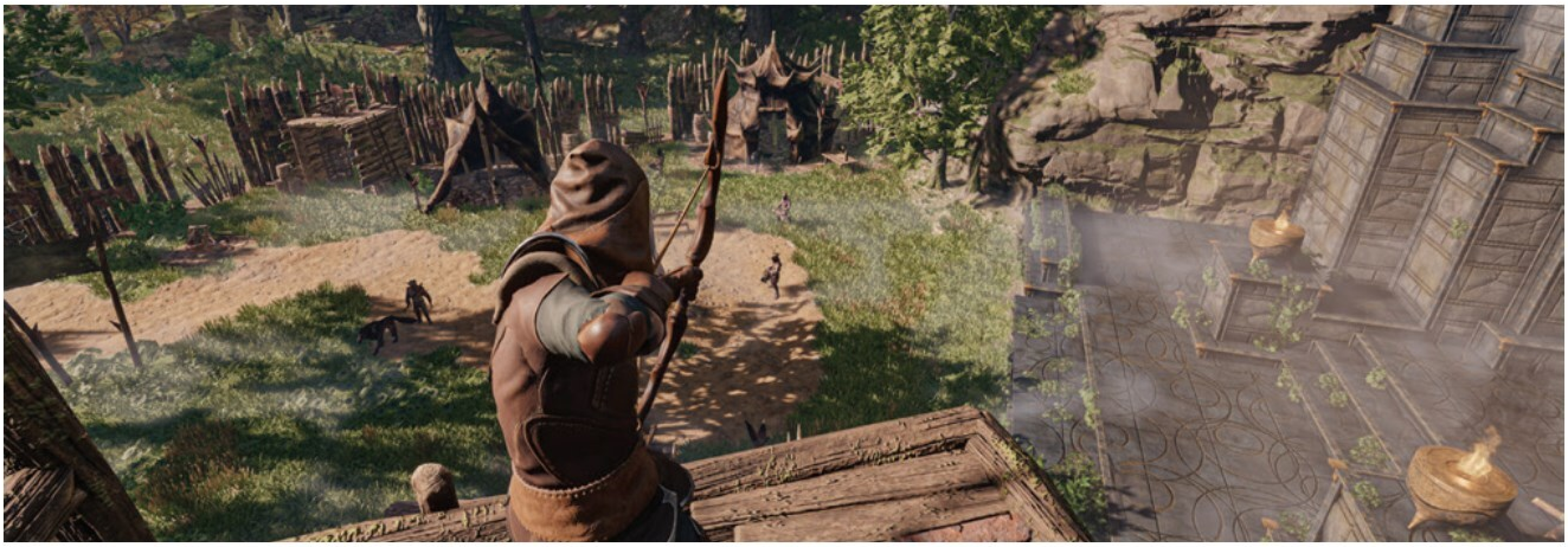
PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Strategy **PUBLISHER** 11 Bit Studios
DEVELOPER 11 Bit Studios **RELEASE** 2024

POPULATION
20590



ENSHROUDED

A survival revival



Enshrouded, the latest from Portal Knights developer Keen Games, is technically a survival game, but it twists the classic formula in all the right ways to make something new and exciting. Embervale is not a world that tries to starve or slay you, but one that beckons you to explore and expand.

Awaking shirtless in a cave with ancient magical technology, you emerge into the sunlight to see you're at the top of a large hill with a beautiful vista ahead of you. Unlike many survival games, Enshrouded's world is not procedurally generated, and this works to its benefit. As you gather your first flimsy shield and weapons, you slowly become acquainted with the mechanics of the world. Crafting recipes are unlocked as you acquire new ingredients, so you're encouraged to poke around and fill your inventory with odds and ends.

While the survival elements are certainly present and primary, a lot of the traditional friction those systems create has been eliminated or mitigated in various ways. While tools do have a durability bar, it's automatically refilled as soon as you reach a crafting table. You can eat food and drink water, but there are no hunger or thirst meters – they just provide stat benefits to aid you in combat or exploration. Combining this relaxed survival system with the fact that the world is not procedurally generated ultimately facilitates an experience where you're not pressured to survive. Instead, you can focus on the other pillars of the genre – exploring the world and building a base.

The former of those two pillars is where Enshrouded shines. Going on expeditions to find loot and crafting materials will lead you to discover abandoned villages and camps of enemies. There's also the titular shroud, a magical mist that blankets certain areas of the map, only allowing you to explore for sessions of a few minutes at a time. That risk is met with equal reward, however, as the shroud houses unique crafting materials needed to make magic items like wands and ammunition for staves.

There's also some story content in the form of notes and letters if you care to engage with it, along with a main quest to embark on. That said, in my four hours of demo time, I never even had the chance to get to the second marker on the map, purely because there was so much to do on the way there.

While the exploration loop is fun, I had trouble engaging with the building elements of the game. I appreciated some parts of the process, like the fact that it takes a small amount of wood to make a massive number of blocks, but the actual process of placing those blocks is frustrating, especially on a controller. The size of one block is so small that it takes a lot of fiddling to get a piece exactly where you want it, and some blocks refused to go where I wanted them, no matter how hard I tried. In one location, I struggled to construct even a basic house.

I think this partly has to do with the spots I chose to build, but that leads me to another point: you can only craft buildings near fast-travel points called flame altars. You can choose where to put them, but moving one destroys everything you built in the vicinity, and you only start with the ability to place two. In a particularly annoying stretch of the game, I attempted to move one of my altars to a further point on the map but died halfway, dropping all my stuff in the shroud, forcing me back to my first altar near the start of the game.

As much as the building mechanics frustrated me, I've never been much of a builder in survival games. Still, I had so much fun exploring Enshrouded's world that I'm still eager to return when it hits early access sometime next year. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action (16-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Keen Games
DEVELOPER Keen Games **RELEASE** 2024 (Early Access)

BLACK MYTH: WUKONG

A Soulslike journey to the West

Journey to the West, a 16th-century Chinese novel by Wu Cheng'en, has inspired countless other pieces of media, including *Dragon Ball* and even Mega Man: The Wily Wars. And while you'll find plenty of other references to the novel in other video games, including Pokémon and Persona 5, there aren't nearly as many games adapting the novel's events. Black Myth: Wukong, developer Game Science's second title, however, is doing just that.

The team says Wukong is an action RPG rooted deeply in Chinese mythology, with a story based on "*Journey to the West*, one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature." As such, players take on the role of the Destined One, a monkey-like protagonist named Wukong who must venture forth through various locations in a world unseen.

"Six years ago, on April Fool's Day, by chance, we determined to develop a big-deal video game," the team writes on its website. "And six years before that, we fiercely argued about where Sun Wukong headed to after his Buddhahood. Twelve years in total, the commitment we made became malarky in the end.

"On countless nights of working overtime, exhaustedly, we asked ourselves half-jokingly: How much did it matter whether Game Science exists or not? Had any game we developed provided this world with more fun? Had any story, character, or gameplay we made ever inspired you, players? I have to confess, we ourselves [didn't know the answer either]."

Game Science says this game is its "yes."

The team sounds confident in Wukong, and after the latest trailer, I can see why; it looks great.

In it, we see a headless man singing and playing a guitar-like instrument called a Liuqin. This instrument has called forth some flying enemies for Wukong to take on. We then see Wukong fighting a massive bipedal tiger-like monster in a blood bath, a gigantic stone golem, a monkey larger than himself, a spiked bug, and more. It's not a secret that Wukong features combat similar to that of From Software's games – it seems most inspired by Sekiro – and that's on display in this trailer's various action shots.

However, it's also distinctly its own thing, with Game Science turning Wukong into a heavily acrobatic fighter. He flips through the air before landing kicks to enemy faces, spins off his large pole weapon, and more. It looks fast, fun, and sure to keep players on their toes.

We still don't have a release date yet, but this trailer further confirmed it's due out sometime next year. This trailer also further confirmed that Game Science is a studio of visual wizards because the game looks beautiful, in that "I would never visit this monster-plagued land, but I really enjoy playing games in it" kind of way.

Locales are vibrant, whether it's the crimson-hued blood filling a massive pit or the blood moon rising over the otherwise autumnal land. On the mountains, Wukong's blood, and presumably the blood of his enemies, splatters red across the white snow. Game Science describes the game as "romantic," and the visuals here paint that picture well.

It's a unique take on *Journey to the West*, and that story seems ripe for a Soulslike experience. Having not gone hands-on with Wukong yet, it's impossible to say how the game feels to play, a critical aspect of any action RPG. But based on what I've seen, Game Science is on to something with its second release. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Game Science
DEVELOPER Game Science **RELEASE** 2024

HARAROLD HALIBUT

The stop-motion adventure 11 years in the making

The first teaser trailer for Harold Halibut was released six years ago and was only a minute and a half long, but it immediately grabbed my attention. The footage showed a stop-animated Harold (or what looked stop-animated) cleaning up graffiti in an underwater facility. The striking visuals inspired a thought I don't often have – how did they do that? It was my first question for game director Ole Tillmann and art director Onat Hekimoglu when I recently spoke with them.

"We actually started with the idea of wanting to make a stop motion game," Tillmann says while citing that the first steps he and his team took toward making the game were in 2011. Harold Halibut is not truly stop-motion animated, but everything you see in the game is something the team has made in the real world. "We build sets and the puppets, and then we 3D-scan everything to make 3D models out of them," Tillmann says. "Of course, they need some manual tweaking. But ultimately, we basically have the same kind of 3D models you would use in any other 3D game, which means we also have all the possibilities." The result is a beautiful visual style that genuinely looks hand-crafted.

Much of the team's background is focused more on the art of making models and film as opposed to video games. "The whole team has very diverse backgrounds, from all kinds of different things that are not necessarily game-related," Hekimoglu says. "We have lots of people in our team who hate games. But it's actually a nice and interesting check to see if … if they like this game, then it will also work for people who are non-gamers," Hekimoglu says.

Velocity
Efficiency
Flow
Oscillation
Frequency

The premise of the game is as compelling as the visuals. During the Cold War, a community of explorers and scientists left Earth, fearing its destruction. The mission was somewhat successful. The ship exited Earth searching for a new habitable planet, but it crash-landed on one covered in water, where external atmospheric issues prevented it from escaping. The ship and the folks living on it decided to make do with what they had. Now, generations of humans have survived for hundreds of years on this underwater planet.

Harold, alongside everyone he knows and meets throughout the game, has been on the ship his whole life. A short window of opportunity has appeared, however, granting them a brief chance to potentially leave and finally return to Earth.

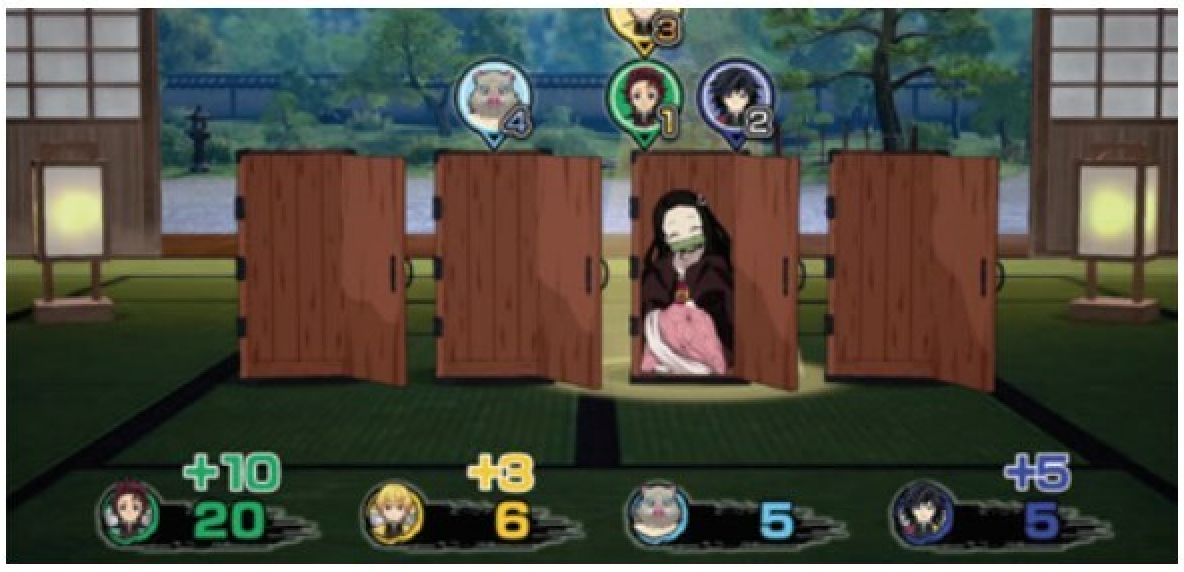
Tillmann and Hekimoglu showed me some gameplay that involved exploring the ship, meeting its residents, and helping them wherever possible. Harold moved between ship sections by climbing into a pipe that would fill with water and essentially flush him to a different area.

Harold Halibut is an adventure game, but potentially complicated puzzles shouldn't scare you off. "We were thinking about a point-and-click adventure, and we thought no, it would slow the story down. So why don't we drop like all the puzzles?" Tillman says, citing the success of games like Night in the Woods and Firewatch giving them confidence that players would embrace an adventure game focused entirely on narrative. Still, the team was not interested in making a film. "At one point, we really thought about a case that while this is a very cinematic and narrative-focused game, there is still something that the interactivity adds to it," Hekimoglu says. "Even if it's just walking around and talking with people, because it enables a more empathic connection to the medium."

Harold Halibut has been in the works for a long time, but it will finally be released early next year on Xbox Game Pass alongside other platforms. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Slow Bros.
DEVELOPER Slow Bros. **RELEASE** 2024

DEMON SLAYER: KIMETSU NO YAIBA – SWEEP THE BOARD!



A multiplayer board game likely inspired by Mario Party probably wouldn't be my first idea for a video game based on the popular but violent anime about fighting demons in Taishō era Japan. Considering the series attracts a surprisingly young audience, however, maybe Sega and Aniplex know exactly what they're doing. The multiplayer game lets players pick their favorite characters, play minigames, and even fight notable demons from the anime/manga. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Party **PUBLISHER** Sega
DEVELOPER Aniplex Inc. **RELEASE** 2024

SPY X ANYA: OPERATION MEMORIES

Spy x Family is arguably the newest surprise anime/manga hit to make its way to the United States. The story – told mainly from the perspective of psychic child Anya – follows the exploits of a spy and an assassin who form a fake family to stay undercover but are unaware of each other's secret lives. The show is funny and action-packed, but the cozy game approach actually feels like a perfect fit.

BY KYLE HILLIARD

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation
PUBLISHER Bandai Namco **DEVELOPER** Bandai Namco **RELEASE** 2024

ONE-PUNCH MAN: WORLD

FRESH
CONVENIE

Continuing the anime theme of the preview round-up this month, *One-Punch Man* – a comedy about a dejected hero who defeats everyone in one punch but never gets credit for saving the day – is getting a new video game adaptation. In World, players take their favorite characters online to battle each other and NPC villains. It's unclear how One-Punch Man himself, Saitama, will work, but in the previous video game adaption, he lived up to his titular ability to comedic effect. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

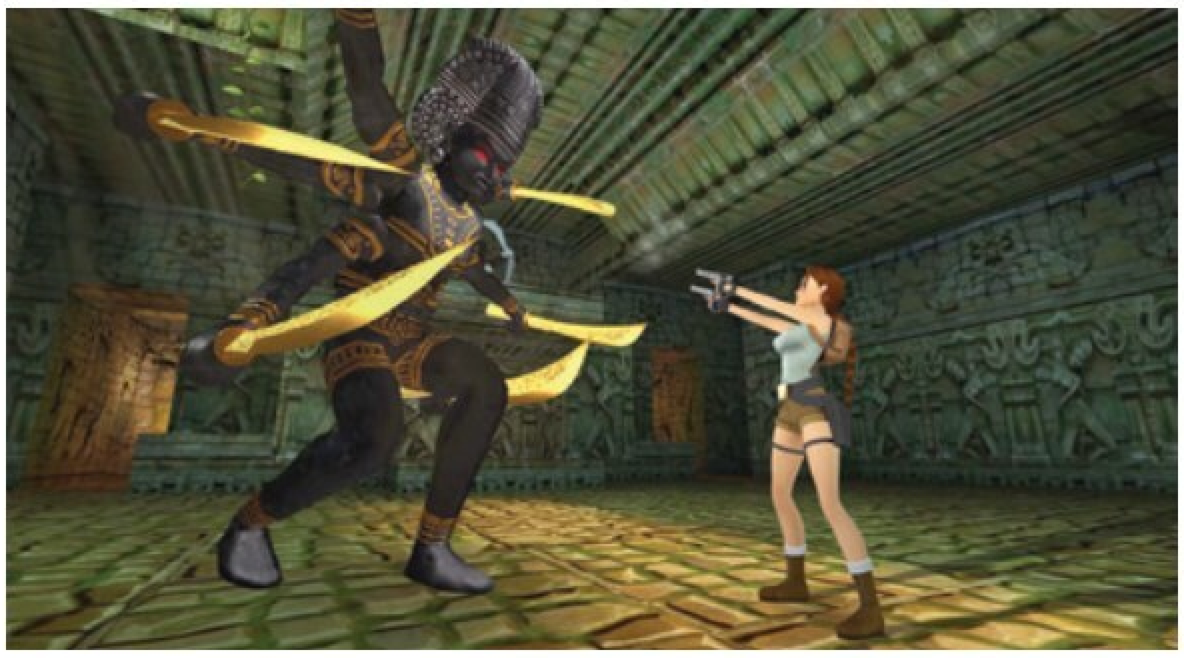
PLATFORM PC • iOS • Android **STYLE** 1-Player Action (Online TBD)
PUBLISHER Crunchyroll Games **DEVELOPER** Perfect World
RELEASE 2024

JUJUTSU KAISEN CURSED CLASH

Another big recent anime hit in the West, *Jujutsu Kaisen* follows a hot-headed teen who discovers and joins a secret organization of monster and Curse hunters. The series recently got the Fortnite treatment, but Cursed Clash is its first proper standalone video game adaptation, and it's going the route many anime adaptations go – 3D multiplayer player brawler fighting game. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 to 4-Player Fighting **PUBLISHER** Bandai Namco
DEVELOPER Bandai Namco **RELEASE** February 2

TOMB RAIDER I-III REMASTERED STARRING LARA CROFT

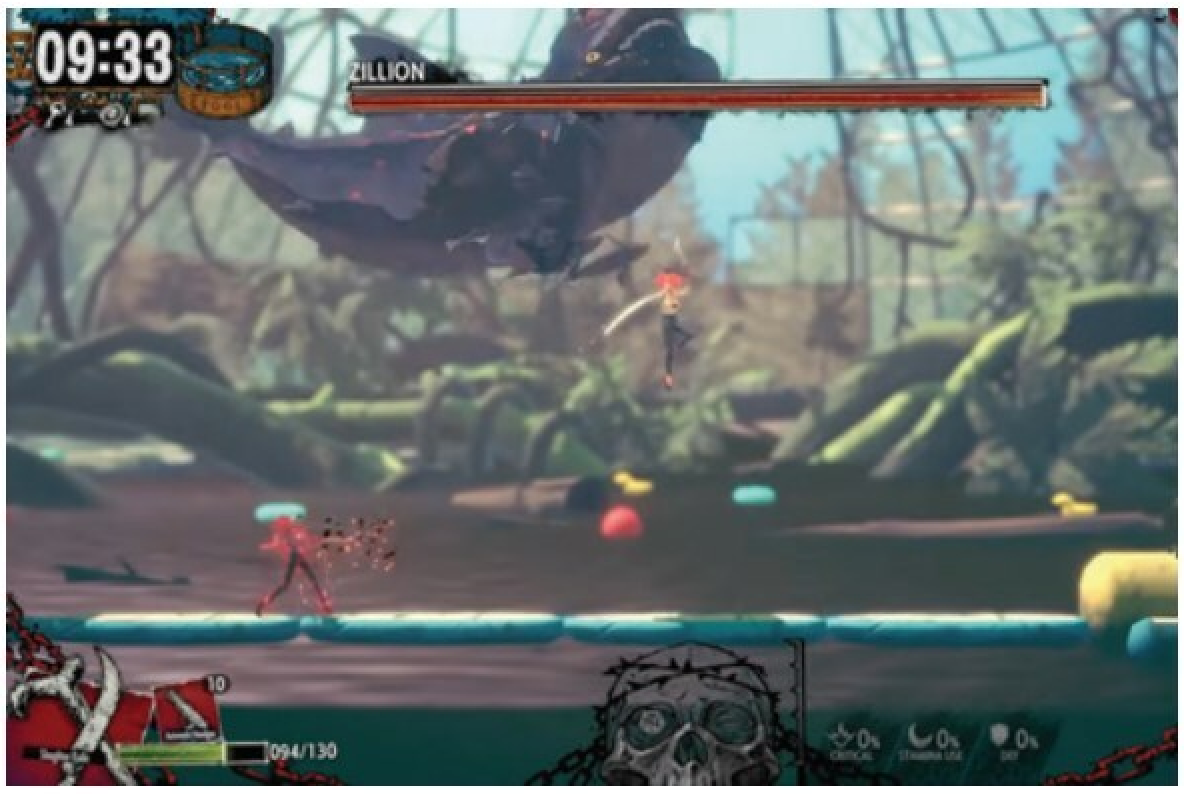


Lara Croft and Tomb Raider are known primarily these days for their excellent, if uneven, trilogy that began in 2013 and the handful of film adaptations. We're not sure what the next big step for Lara is in the triple-A space, but in the meantime, this collection will let players see what all the fuss was about (with upgraded visuals) when the series first started in 1996. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Aspyr, Crystal Dynamics **DEVELOPER** Aspyr
RELEASE February 14

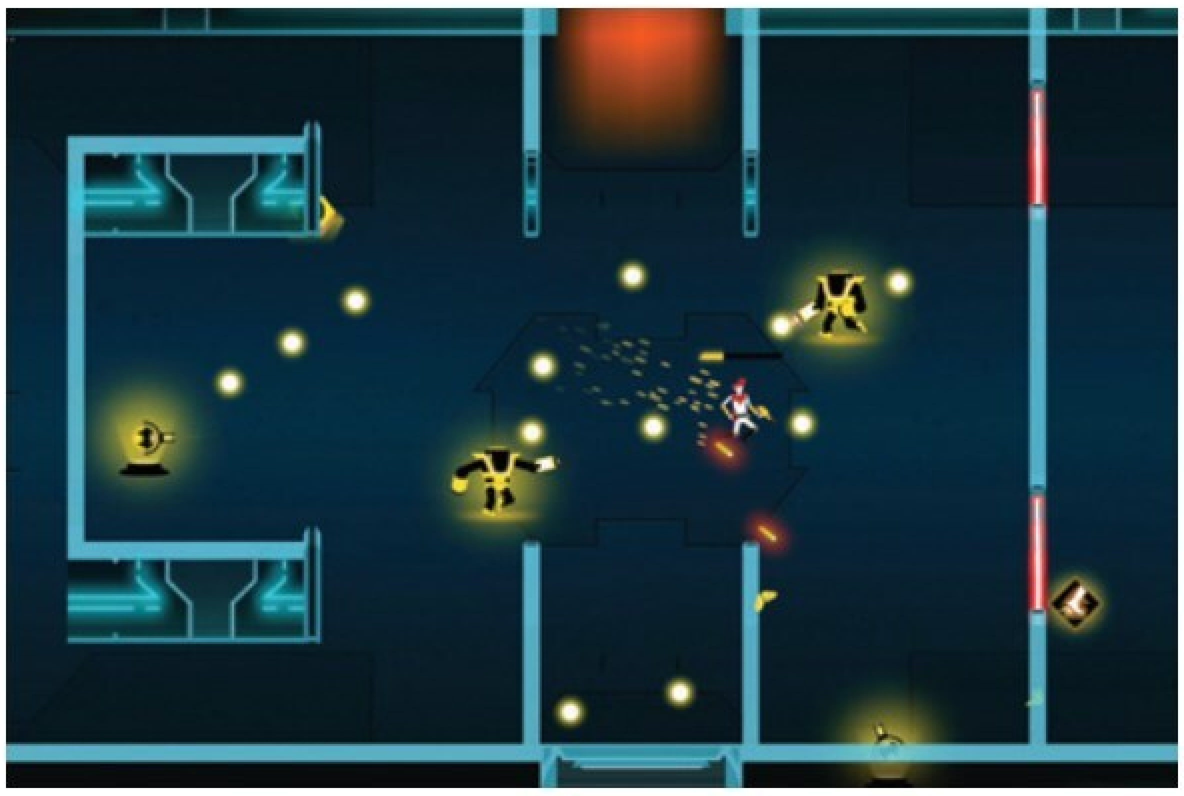
HOTEL BARCELONA

Hotel Barcelona comes from Swery-led studio White Owls Inc. and Suda51 of Grasshopper Manufacture, the team behind the No More Heroes series. In it, serial killers from all around the U.S. gather to do serial killer things in a hotel, but players must defeat them all and check out in time in this "2.5D slasher film parodic action" game. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**



PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER TBA **DEVELOPER** White Owls Inc. **RELEASE** 2024

BERZERK: RECHARGED

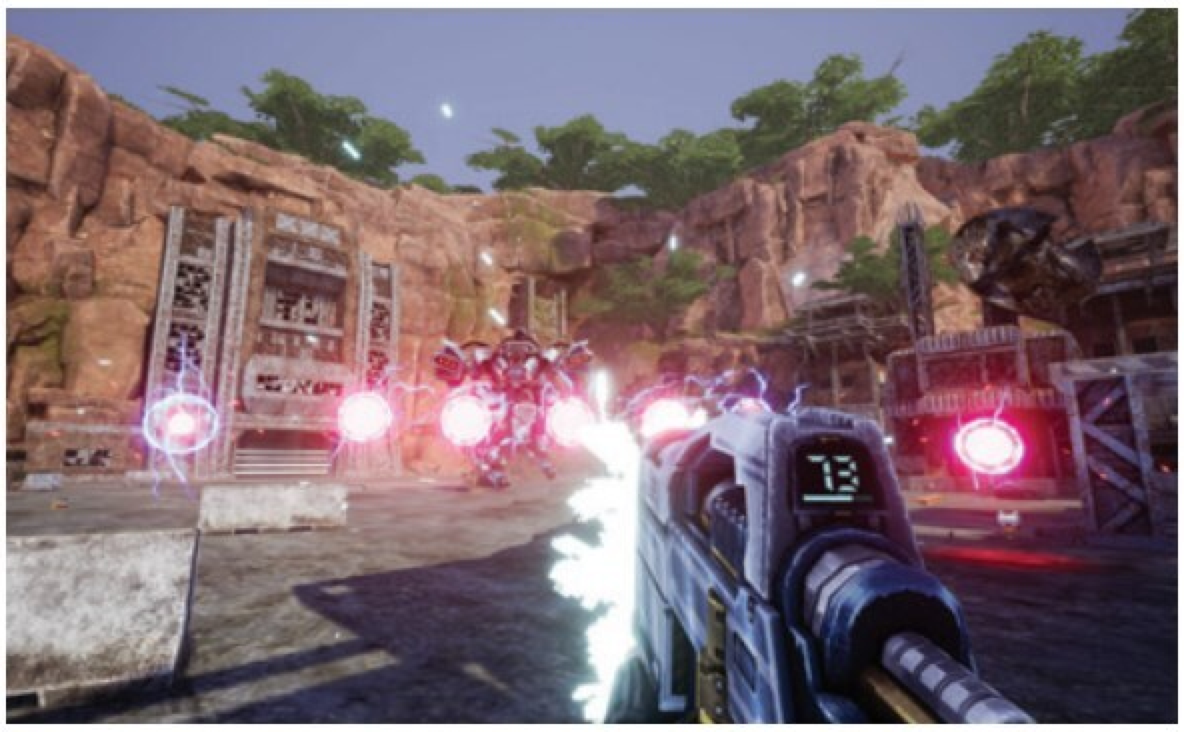


Berzerk: Recharged is the first Berzerk game since the arcade 1980s release, and its November launch comes after Atari announced earlier this year it had acquired the series and its sequel, Frenzy. The original big bad, Evil Otto, a giant smiley face, returns to hunt players down while they avoid his bounces and various robotic enemies using deft twin-stick shooter controls. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 to 2-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Atari **DEVELOPER** Atari **RELEASE** November

PHANTOM FURY

Phantom Fury is a new entry in the increasingly popular throwback boomer shooter genre. The game is a first-person shooter that feels inspired by '80s cinema and late '90s video games like Doom and Half-Life. Visually, the game looks a bit like a PlayStation game with big blocky pixels, and though it is inspired by shooters of the past, it plays well and is full of quippy one-liners from protagonist Shelly "Bombshell" Harrison. **BY KYLE HILLIARD** ■



PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter
PUBLISHER 3D Realms **DEVELOPER** Slipgate Ironworks **RELEASE** 2024

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GI MUST PLAY

MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN 2

Sticking the landing

↘ Images ©2023 Marvel

Being the sequel to two excellent games is not a guarantee of success. But it does set strong expectations. Thankfully, Spider-Man 2 meets and exceeds those expectations, providing uniformly stellar superhero action characterized by blazing-fast combat, smart mission design, and regular injections of thrilling set-pieces. Behind all that excitement, it also houses a fervent and heartfelt commentary on second chances, rehabilitation, and redemption. As a result, even in its dark moments, Spider-Man 2 delivers a wholesome and optimistic adventure rooted in joy.

After two preceding games establishing the two leads on their own, Spider-Man 2 weaves back and forth between the two wall-crawlers, with unique relationship threads and powers that set them apart, but core story beats and central abilities that unite the experience. Rather than a distraction, the switching dynamic (sometimes dictated by story, and sometimes by player choice) keeps things fresh and often provides exciting cliffhangers or action change-ups at critical moments. The tag-team dynamic is rewarding, and both heroes get the chance to shine.

Insomniac's take on web-swinging and traversal through New York City has always been a high point, but it's given new life here through several additional tricks, including wingsuits that let you glide at high speed across rooftops. Exploring the city is great fun, especially given the vast scope of the urban sprawl and the dozens of discoverables hidden along the way.

The intensity of Spidey's combat is always a surprise, whether you're new to these games or returning after some time away. The smoothness of animations, tight camera transitions, and responsive button play keep the speed from feeling overwhelming. I loved experimenting with different powers and gadgets to gain the upper hand against stacked odds. Slotted abilities for each character provide a measure of flexibility to your playstyle, adding at least some minor customization to the flow of battle. Even with that flexibility, Spider-Man 2 is a lengthy game, and the intensity of its frequent conflicts begins to lose its luster after a few dozen hours of punches, kicks, and web throws; it's always good, but the fading thrill of the minion battles is eventually a victim of the game's own sprawling scope and size.

Countering any eventual tedium in minor encounters, Spider-Man 2 also features some of the most climactic and cinematic action sequences I've encountered in a game, easily matching the grandeur and chaos of even the most exciting scenes in Spider-Man's film outings. These technical showpieces revel in the power of the PS5 hardware; step back from the exhilarating scene, and it's easy to ask: "How in the world did the developers do that?" High-speed chases, sudden, instantaneous scene changes, and titanic dynamic shifts to the game environment are common and exhilarating – and that's just in the game's first 15 minutes.

In between the action, Spider-Man 2 tries hard to find novelty in smaller moments and simpler gameplay loops, to varying levels of success. It's odd to say that some of these minor moments would be spoilers, but it's best to discover them for yourself, as each is inserted to change things up in a way that surprises the player. It's enough to say that a few sequences of stealth, non-powered locomotion through the city, and memorable evenings out with friends all act as palate cleansers. While these sequences often serve the story well, I'm not always sold on the accompanying gameplay.

The best comic book stories have often planted real-life societal and personal stories into a backdrop of over-the-top exploits, using the frequent violence to accentuate the themes. Spider-Man 2 takes that idea to heart, constantly challenging the notion of heroism and villainy and coming down on the side that most people are complex and struggling more against their situation in life than it might first appear. Peter and Miles each have challenges to confront. Still, they're united in a belief about the good in those around them and their willingness to go the extra mile to protect even the most seemingly irredeemable individuals. Spider-Man 2's storytelling digs into questions about returning from a dark place and having another chance, no matter past mistakes. And while there's nuance in the answers, the generally optimistic conclusions fall on the side of hope.

Insomniac has nailed that rarest of video game development feats. The team has landed a trilogy of games that all stand strong on their own merits but unite into a sweeping saga made better by experiencing its entirety. While more Spider-Man games will inevitably expand this mythology in new directions, there's no need to wait. With Spider- Man 2, the developer has found what makes superhero stories worth telling (and retelling) and given its likable heroes the journey they deserve.

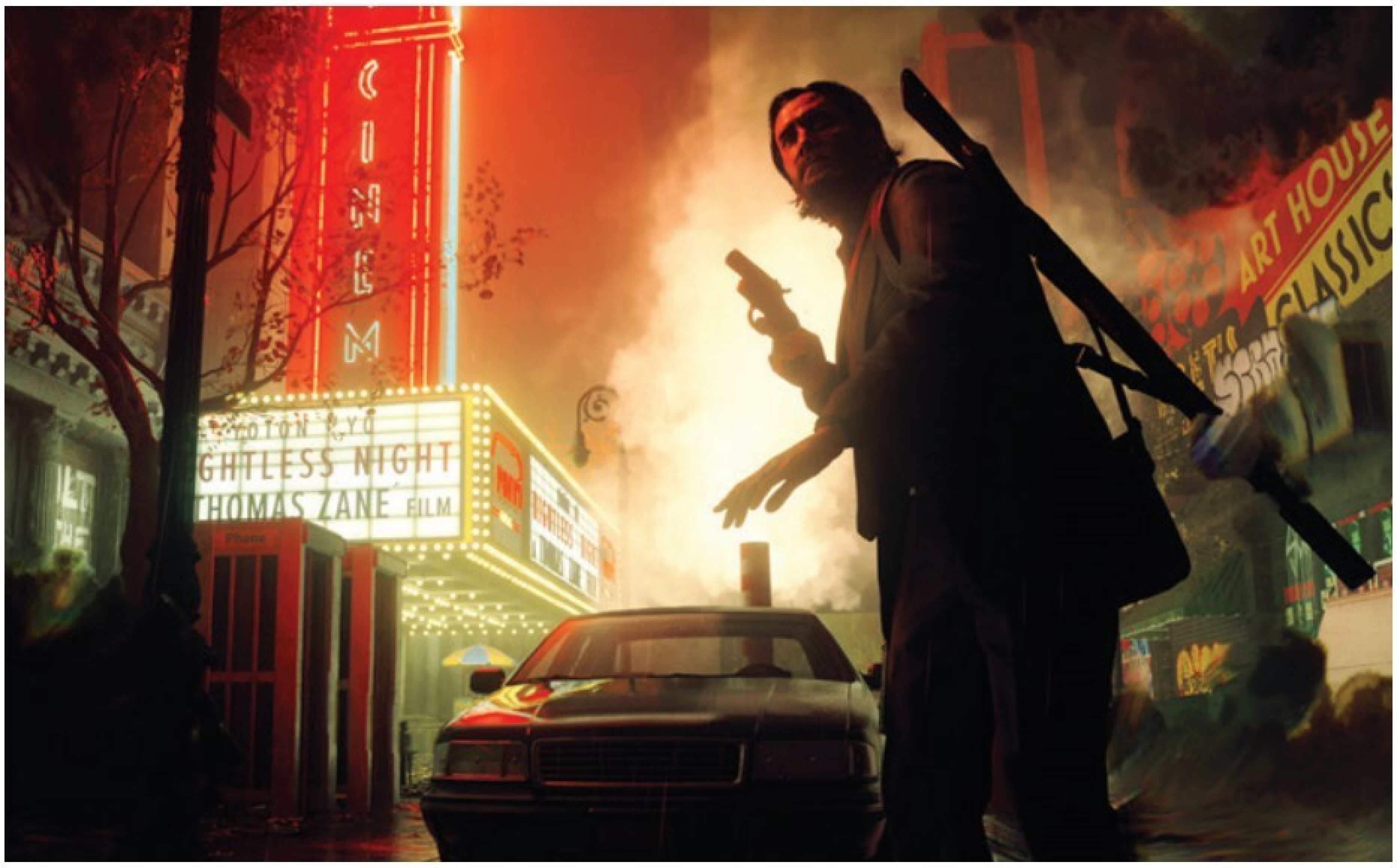
BY MATT MILLER

9.5

PLATFORM PS5 **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Sony Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER Insomniac **RELEASE** October 20 **RATING** T

ALAN WAKE 2

Back to reality



Remedy is known for being experimental. It mixes live-action footage into its video games, plays with player expectations, rewards those devoted to the developer's history and gameography, and in the case of Alan Wake 2, eagerly performs big-budget lunacy for our entertainment and sometimes confusion. The highs of Alan Wake's follow-up adventure are tall, but there are frequent lows that drag the whole experience into The Dark Place. I also encountered a number of bugs that forced frequent restarts and one full reinstallation. But even in the moments I was most frustrated, I still admire Remedy's commitment to creating a unique experience and embracing its weirdness.

Alan Wake 2 takes place in the real amount of time since we played the original game. Alan has been stuck in limbo for 13 years, trying his hardest to write himself back to reality. From a zoomed-out perspective, both Alan Wake games are about a man trying to escape an evil entity. On closer inspection, however, the story is about the nature of art, what it means to create, the reliability of memory and reality, parenting, friendship, and of course, murder. Alan Wake 2's story, sometimes clumsily, navigates all these topics with morose voiceover, beautiful visuals, impressive performances, and bizarre set pieces that will undoubtedly become the game's primary talking point for the rest of its legacy. This is where Alan Wake 2 shines. The way it presents its story is different than just about everything out there, and even though I would have liked more interactivity during conversations and internal monologues, I remained consistently engaged.

The exception to this is new playable protagonist Saga's investigative techniques. While I overall preferred playing as Saga to Alan, her special detective abilities led to frequent underwhelming reveals. Saga arrives at impossible-to-know case facts by simply sitting in a room and thinking to herself. I am happy to buy into the conceit that she has special powers, but from the player's perspective, watching Saga just know things for no reason is deeply unsatisfying. Her interactive efforts to build evidence out on a wall also feel like painting by numbers, when you generally already know what image you are creating. Overall, however, Saga's story and the mystery surrounding her family is the more interesting one, and I followed her threads when given the choice.

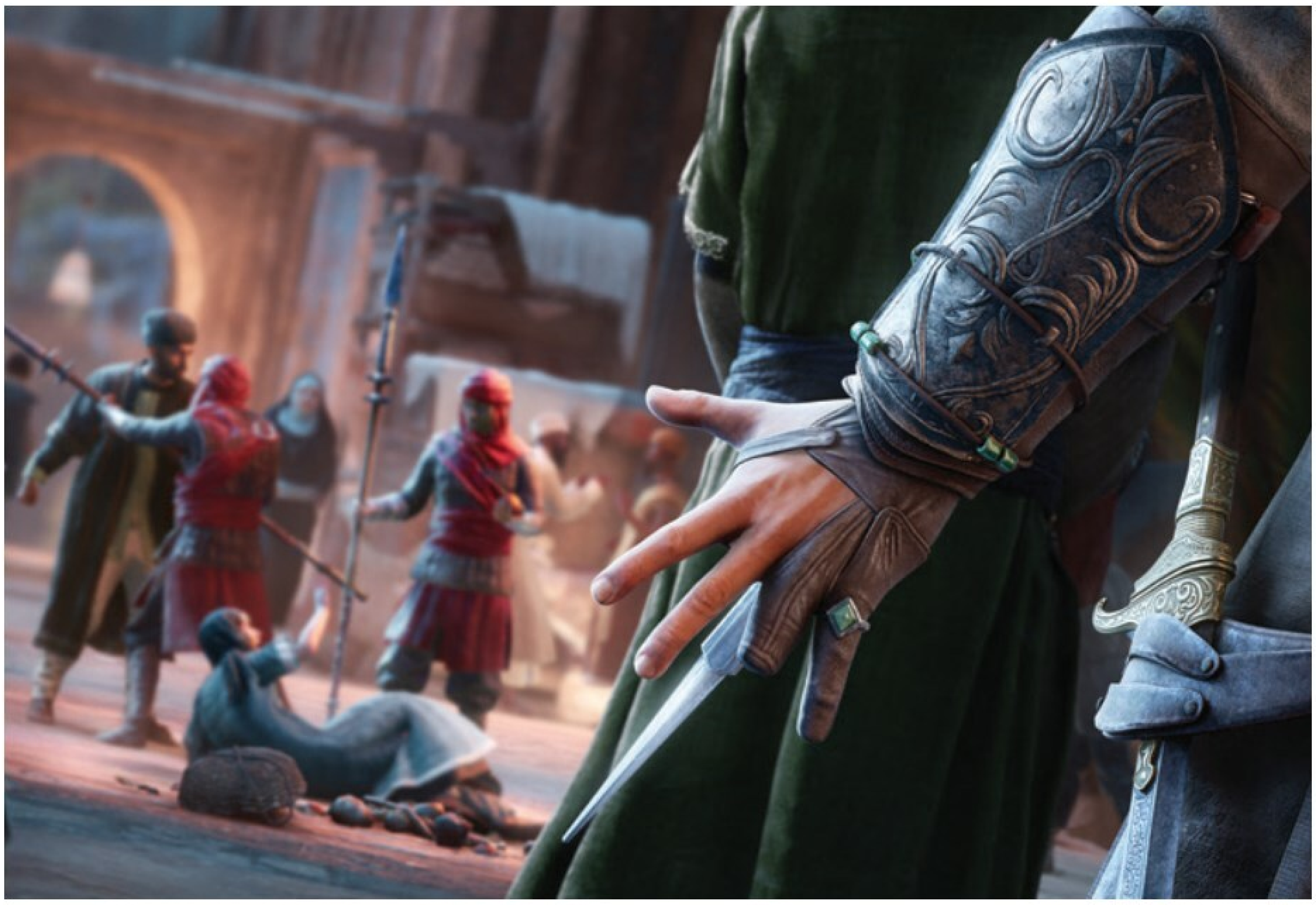
Alan lacks Saga's investigative abilities, but playing his portions, which take place in the abstract Dark Place, have their own issues. Alan is supposed to be lost and confused in the Dark Place, and from a narrative perspective, it works. But when a location (and troublesome map) is already difficult to navigate and then filled with doors that change exits depending on the lighting, things get opaque in a way that isn't consistently fun.

Even when lost and frustrated, however, combat can be a beacon of action-packed joy. Lighting up enemies with a flashlight and filling them with bullets feels more determined than in the 2010 game, but pulling off a perfect flashlight-shotgun combo still feels great. So great, in fact, that I wanted much more. There are few instances where you *must* fight enemies. Ammo is scarce and dodging is reliable, which means engaging is discouraged. Combat ends up feeling like a fantastic dessert when you are watching your calories. You want to partake, but you really shouldn't. Thankfully, the penultimate confrontation throws plentiful ammo and enemies at you and serves as a fun homage to the original game.

I have been eagerly waiting for Alan's return since the original game ended with a cliffhanger and 2012's American Nightmare explansion did little to move the story forward. I am narratively satisfied with the events of the game and enthusiastically welcome Saga into the world. But actually playing the game, navigating the world, and avoiding combat is where I stumbled. I was eager to see the next cutscene, but gameplay often fell short, and I fought more bugs than Taken enemies. For longtime Remedy fans and those who want to see what happens next for Alan Wake, the sequel is a success, but making it to the end includes unnecessary hurdles. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

7.75

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Epic Games Publishing
DEVELOPER Remedy Entertainment
RELEASE October 27 **RATING** M



ASSASSIN'S CREED MIRAGE

Coming home

For years, the Assassin's Creed franchise has expanded the scope of its entries, offering ever longer adventures across increasingly vast open worlds. For players who first tried the series through those entries, Assassin's Creed Mirage may be a shock. Set mainly within the single city of ninth-century Baghdad and playable to completion in under 20 hours, Mirage harkens back to the earliest entries starring Altaïr and Ezio. For more longtime fans, many elements will feel like a return to familiar territory, with the commensurate highs and lows that characterized those early installments.

First introduced in 2020's Assassin's Creed Valhalla where he appeared as an older member of the Brotherhood, protagonist Basim is presented here in his early life. We learn of his transition from street thief to Master Assassin, and the plots he uncovers across the city through a series of investigations and assassinations. The return of the mysterious castle of Alamut, the hidden urban bureaus, and the cautious, structured approach to tracking and taking down primary targets – it's all a nod to the early life of the series. The storytelling and freeform progression of the plot are enjoyable, even if the dialogue feels stiff and formal at times.

Gameplay is a distinct return to a predator-prey style; stealth and tool usage are essential, and open conflict against even a few enemies can quickly lead to death. Even in one-on-one encounters, the melee exchanges are not a high point, as they feel rigid and clumsy. On the other hand, Mirage's missions and contracts often present exciting and curated setups for stealth. Enemy and objective placement is deliberate and thoughtful, forcing players to watch enemies closely and move carefully. The threat of death if discovered is high, which leads to greater tension and engagement with an approach.

The dense urban sprawl of Baghdad's Golden Age is a joy to explore. Lyrical musical melodies follow you along rooftops as russet sunsets paint the sky. Busy street merchants hawk their wares, unwary citizens are ripe for pickpocketing, and hidden chests demand careful observation to reach. High notoriety is a genuine danger as guards converge and hunters track you down. The opportunity for engaging parkour traversal is always present, and moving along rooftops, sliding down zip lines, and diving into hiding spots is great fun.

Individual missions often have some fun twists and turns, and I like the way the game encourages decisions in the stalking of a target. Choosing between two or three distinct tactical routes provides a sense of creativity. Nailing a complete infiltration with no one the wiser only to slip away in the uproar surrounding your villainous victim's death is deeply satisfying.

While I enjoy the missions, too many rely on dull investigation areas, where I was forced to scour a zone until I found just the right book or clue to progress. Too often, these devolved into aimless wandering that felt like a waste of time.

Even so, across the board, the excess that has characterized recent entries seems to have been reined in. The money and favor tokens you earn are valuable and must be spent with care. Acquiring a new tool is a big deal, and can be transformative to approaching a fight. Fewer side missions or activities are on offer, but those here feel curated and purposeful. It's a more compact game, but I felt driven and engaged with everything I did along the path to its completion.

Mirage teases a larger mystery that connects to Basim's role in the earlier Valhalla release. But in this case, the resolution of that mystery is unsatisfying and feels like an odd wrap-up to an otherwise self-contained narrative. Concerns about the conclusion aside, I still had a wonderful time in Baghdad's ancient alleys and palaces. Not everything is perfect, but the "less is more" design philosophy goes a long way to making this one of the most consistently engaging titles within the series for some time.

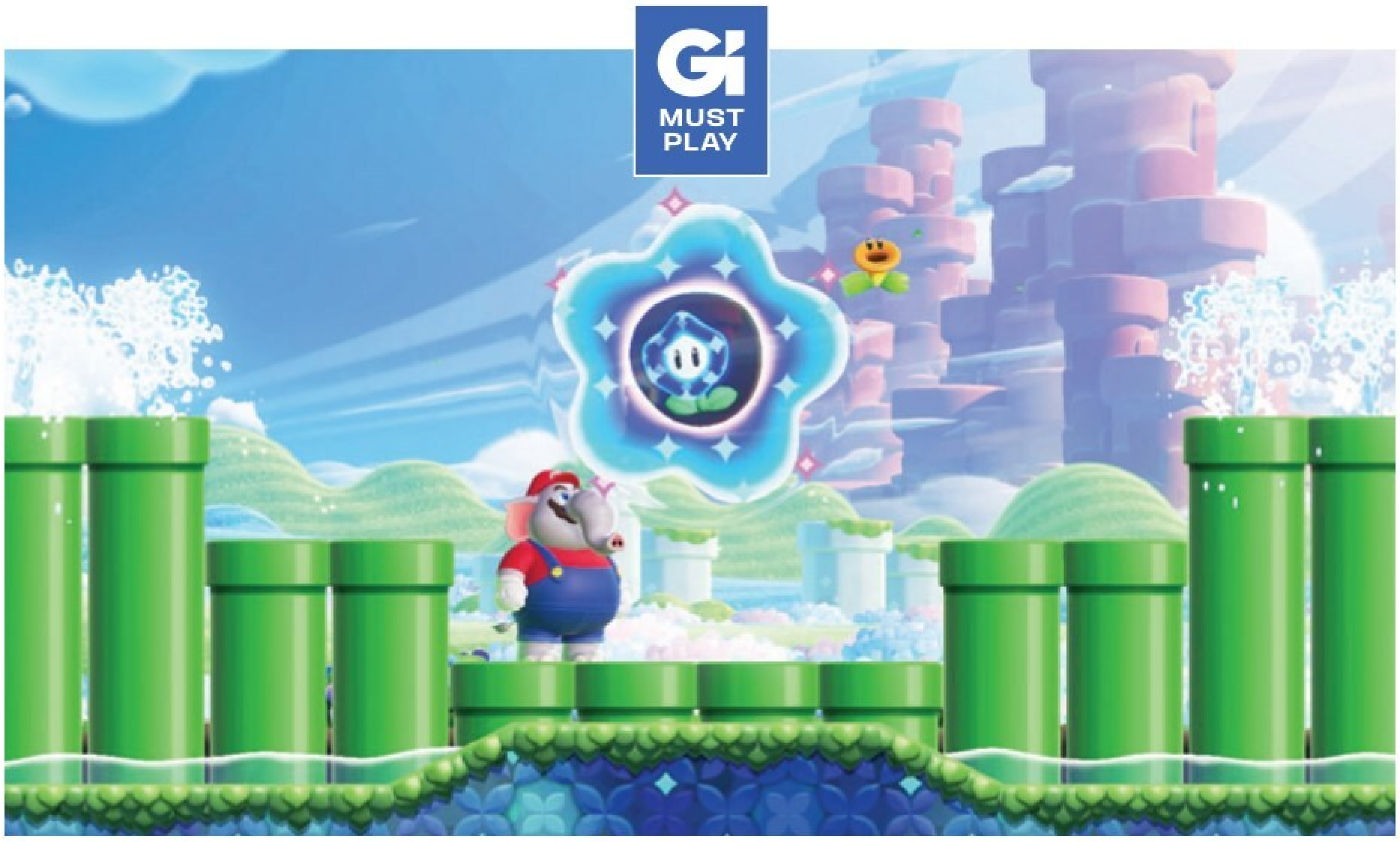
BY MATT MILLER

8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Ubisoft **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Bordeaux **RELEASE** October 5 **RATING** M

SUPER MARIO BROS. WONDER

Getting its flowers



As a series that has been around for nearly four decades, Super Mario Bros. should have shown signs of slowing down years ago. But continuous thoughtful reinvention has helped the franchise remain a genre leader. Super Mario Bros. Wonder represents the next step of evolution, delivering the tight, tried-and-true gameplay in the context of the most creative 2D entry in nearly 30 years.

Simply platforming through a stage is often a pure delight; Mario and his large roster of friends have never felt, looked, or sounded better. A joyful soundtrack full of upbeat earworms I've been humming since I first turned on the game complements superb gameplay. And the new expressive art style accentuates the most important parts of the characters and world.

Super Mario Bros. Wonder's level design rarely disappoints. Each course introduces a new, creative gimmick. Whether it's hippo-like creatures you can bounce off to reach new areas or circular rocks you use to roll through lava while snatching collectibles, the perfectly designed on-ramps let me learn the new convention. However, the excitement of how the stage gimmick would evolve to its ultimate utilization always had me champing at the bit.

The new power-ups, namely the Elephant Fruit, Drill Mushroom, and Bubble Flower, add fun and practical ways to explore each stage. But the new Badge system is my favorite way to augment my character's abilities. The Parachute Cap, which lets you glide, and the Sensor, which tells you when there's a secret nearby, were helpful, but my go-to was the Crouching High Jump, thanks to its wide-ranging utility.

Still, the key attractions were the eponymous Wonder Effects. These level-changing warps had me constantly guessing at what could possibly come next. I never knew if grabbing the Wonder Flower would transform Mario into one of Bowser's minions, skyrocket him into an outer space obstacle course, or cause the entire stage to break out into song. Nintendo used this opportunity to create all-new gameplay mechanics like top-down sequences, slow-motion action, and fun chase sequences. I adore how unexpected each Wonder Effect is, even aiding the title's less creative boss battles.

Though there are only a few true boss fights in Super Mario Bros. Wonder, they use Wonder Effects to bring new twists. However, outside of these effects, which include changing the terrain, cloning enemies, and more, most battles are against the same character with the same move set. I appreciate how far the Wonder Effects go toward diversifying these confrontations, but I can't help but wish for more variety in the encounters themselves. Thankfully, that's not the case for the final battle, which will stick with me for a long time due to its uncompromised use of Wonder Effects in a creative and fun fight.

I spent most of my time in Super Mario Bros. Wonder solo, but I enjoyed the limited multiplayer offering. I'm disappointed by the lack of online cooperative play, but playing locally with friends is a blast and less chaotic than past games since characters can't interact with each other (aside from riding on Yoshi).

You can play online with friends, but you're limited to forming a lobby where you appear as ghosts in separate instances; you revive each other, but that's the extent of the interaction. You can also set up course races, where you see who makes it to the flagpole first. But while these challenges are enjoyable, they take away what makes Super Mario Bros. Wonder so good in the first place. My favorite moments came when I was taking my time finding secrets or enjoying Wonder Effects rather than speedrunning.

Super Mario Bros. Wonder surprises and delights from the moment you turn on the game. Though the gameplay feels familiar, Nintendo's ability to iterate on the established formula in unique ways kept me on my toes throughout the journey all the way up to the memorable final battle. After all this time, I thought I had a grasp on the breadth of the tricks the 2D Mario series had up its sleeve, but that Super Mario Bros. Wonder so consistently surprised me speaks to just how much gas is left in the iconic franchise's tank.

BY BRIAN SHEA

9.25

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Platforming (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Nintendo
RELEASE October 20 **RATING** E

SONIC SUPERSTARS

The folly of teamwork

Sonic Superstars marks a step back to the Genesis-era 2D platforming that put the series on the map and a leap forward by letting three more friends join the adventure. While the former largely succeeds in providing an enjoyable nostalgic experience, the latter fails to allow partners to have the same amount of fun.

As either Sonic, Tails, Knuckles, or Amy, you spin dash your way through a new batch of beautifully designed zones. From the twisting vines and lush greenery of Speed Jungle to the gilded architecture of the Golden Capital, Sonic Superstars pops with bright colors and cool designs for the new gallery of badniks. Platforming physics perfectly replicates the feel of Sonic's Genesis adventures, allowing me to comfortably slip into the action like putting on an old glove.

The large zones feature deviously placed enemies, death traps, and new traversal gimmicks. I liked mechanics such as jumping across speeding rollercoaster trains in a casino zone or transforming into pixelated avatars in a cyberspace-inspired world. Other challenges are a pain, such as carefully navigating a pitch-black jungle with only a glowing butterfly for light – an idea ill-suited for Sonic's faster-paced style of play. Levels capture the core fun of Sonic: zipping through elaborate obstacles at breakneck speed while dodging hazards at the last second. That also means they sport the same trial-and-error design ethos of the classic games; you often won't – or can't – anticipate a hazard until it's too late, leading to cheap deaths in some instances.

Chaos Emeralds now grant new powers upon their collection. Avatar and Vision let you send attacking clones across the screen and reveal hidden rings and platforms, respectively. My favorite is Bullet, which lets you fire yourself in a chosen direction for an explosive boost. These powers are totally optional and easy to miss, so while they can be useful, they aren't vital. I often forget I have them at my disposal and rarely feel compelled to use them as threats can easily be conquered with your base moveset. Emerald powers don't detract, but they're not as meaningful to the experience as I hoped.

Unfortunately, the newly added four-player co-op affirms my biggest fear going in: 2D Sonic is not built for traditional multiplayer. Playing with even one other person can be a mess, as going faster or slower than your partner forces you to respawn back to them. Sonic games are about speed, and levels sport numerous paths, but since players aren't free to explore independently, you're rubberbanded back together in a jarring fashion. Other challenges seem ill-suited for multiple players; the illumination-focused zone is a nightmare with other people since only one player can hold the light, forcing everyone else to either stick extremely close by or wander blindly. Playing co-op feels less like working together and more like fighting to stay together.

Despite some big caveats, such as an unremarkable soundtrack and the bland minigames of Battle Mode, I mostly enjoyed Sonic Superstars as a solo trip down memory lane. The platforming feels good, the levels are mostly fun, and the presentation looks great. Ripping through robots while hitting loop-de-loops and bounce pads still brings a smile to my face. But the game's new additions either feel inconsequential or ill-advised, watering down an otherwise respectable package. Sonic Superstars offers a solid return to form for the series' oldest and most ardent followers, with some hedgehog-sized potholes along the way. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

7.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 to 4-Player Platforming **PUBLISHER** Sega
DEVELOPER Arzest, Sonic Team **RELEASE** October 17 **RATING** E

FORZA MOTORSPORT

Keeping pace

It can be rare for a newer franchise to challenge a well-established genre leader for the throne, but that's precisely what the Forza Motorsport series has done since its first entry in 2005. Since then, the sim-racing genre has featured dueling front-runners, with Gran Turismo and Forza Motorsport taking turns in the lead. The latest entry, simply titled Forza Motorsport, takes a back-to-basics approach to keep pace with its chief rival.

Speeding around the track has never felt better. A palpable sense of speed accompanies excellent physics and visuals to create a superb racing experience. A multitude of factors converge, including track surface, weather, the wear of your tires, and the various tuning elements of your vehicle, to determine how your vehicle handles and feels.

In the hundreds of laps I drove, I can't remember any instance when I skidded off the track or allowed an opponent to overtake me where I didn't immediately understand what I did wrong. However, a penalty system meant to discourage cutting corners or ramming opponents is less spelled out; one intentionally caused crash yielded no penalty, while the same system docked me more than a second for some routine paint-trading around a corner. I appreciate what it sets out to do, but the inconsistent penalties caused me to throw my hands up in disbelief.

Single-player races are spiced up by the series' trademark Drivatar feature, which helps A.I. drivers behave more like real players. I love that it replicates player tendencies and their mistakes; I still occasionally see A.I. drivers spinning out onto the track-side rubble. This dynamic behavior helps add variety to an otherwise straightforward career mode.

Forza Motorsport's career mode was where I spent the most time. The campaign presents you with different themed cups and tours in which to compete. I like the simple nature of playing through various cups in successive order, though I would have liked more freedom in the mode's progression and car collection.

As you race, you earn credits, which can be used to buy more cars, but you also level cars up in an odd RPG-lite twist. As you complete certain feats on the track, your car gains levels. I quickly became hooked on posting the best times on individual track segments to gain more experience. However, I don't like that upgrade components are locked behind your car level. These arbitrary level gates made me less interested in going in and tweaking my cars' parts manually; I often opted just to have the game optimize the upgrade for me.

For those who want to compete against real people, Forza Motorsports' capable multiplayer suite offers several avenues to take on racers from across the globe. Featured races offer a diverse array of events starring different cars in the expansive Forza garage with a set start time, but I loved jumping into instant-action Rivals events, where you're tasked with beating another player's time.

Even in a field full of stellar-looking racing games, Forza Motorsport is a visual feast. Each of the 20 tracks features intricate details and weather that make it feel like a lived-in world, but the cars are the true stars of the show. Whether you're driving around in common street cars from Honda and Ford, supercars from Ferrari and McLaren, or the various racing-tuned speed machines on offer, each vehicle's impressive look and sound match the uncompromised feel of the on-the-track action.

You can visually customize each of the more than 500 launch cars with custom paint jobs and vinyls, but I'm disappointed by the limited body-customization options. I'm also underwhelmed by the damage, which is a shame since so much of the game is built around attention to detail. The lack of overt damage is particularly noticeable when you have the performance-impacting damage setting from higher difficulties on and your car is struggling to stay on the road, but it looks like it was in little more than a fender bender.

Forza Motorsport may not have the most in-depth career mode, but it executes nearly every aspect of the package exceptionally well. Though some of the progression and dynamic visual elements fall short of the realism the rest of the title achieves, Forza Motorsport currently vies for the pole position in the sim-racer field. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

8.75

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Racing (24-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Xbox Game Studios **DEVELOPER** Turn 10 Studios
RELEASE October 10 **RATING** E

SKANDA
X BOOTS

GI MUST PLAY

GHOSTRUNNER 2

Finding the utopia in dystopia

I didn't need much to be satisfied with another parkour venture into developer One More Level's cyberpunk dystopia; I just wanted more Ghostrunner. And when Ghostrunner 2 is doing what put its predecessor on the map – first-person action-parkour – it shines. But a few new attempts at expanding this world, both narratively and mechanically, don't shine as bright, however interesting and admirable they are. Nonetheless, Ghostrunner 2, with its exceptional action, soundtrack, and beautifully oppressive world, kept me smiling for most of my 15 hours.

Ghostrunner 2 picks up one year after the first game, with Jack living the hero life before discovering the Asura, a group of four mechanical beings intent on filling the power void to become its new leaders. It's a fine setup, but it unfortunately begins with the worst boss fight in the game. The encounter is not bad, but it pales compared to the significantly improved bosses Jack encounters later.

After taking the boss down, I meet up with the ragtag Interface Council, including Zoe from the first game and various other NPCs. Instead of talking to floating heads like in Ghostrunner, Jack returns to a homebase where he speaks with everyone in person. Interfacing with physical people is a nice touch and breathes life into Jack's otherwise mechanical existence. Unfortunately, conversations lack the energy featured in the rest of the game, as Jack and whoever he speaks to stand directly across each other while stilted but informative conversations play out. In this base, Jack can purchase new abilities for his kit and play through Roguerunner.exe, an optional but awesome roguelite experience that puts combat front and center.

After checking in with the base between most missions, Jack is quickly thrown back into the explosive action One More Level excels at, and it always rules. To the backing tunes of an excellent synth score, I send Jack slashing enemies left and right with a katana, slowing down time in-air to dodge projectiles and more. Like the first game, Ghostrunner 2 also feels like a puzzle game.

Every arena can be mastered, and your solution to the combat puzzle is just one of many. Ghostrunner 2's action feels amazing because every potential solution unveils itself in what feels like the most optimal path.

Those action-packed, puzzle-like moments are when Ghostrunner 2 is everything I want in a sequel and more. But the results are less consistent when One More Level introduces new mechanics. A new motorbike brings an even more exciting dynamism to Ghostrunner 2's action – jumping off it to launch over a laser wall, then grappling back onto my bike after it safely passed through said wall never stopped being the coolest thing ever. I enjoyed most moments on this bike, but after a quick ride through Dharma Tower's neon-drenched cyberpunk city, most of the bike action happens in the less-interesting world outside the tower.

I love that One More Level showcased the outside world. However, the post-apocalyptic desert wasteland is simply not as fun to explore as what's back inside, especially on foot. Another addition is the wingsuit, and while using it in new parkour lines is fun, using it in combat feels like an unnecessary addition.

With Ghostrunner 2 behind me, I'm thrilled more of this series exists. Even after rolling credits, I'm excited to tear through its levels once more to find collectibles like sword and glove skins and old-world artifacts like VHS tapes, and try my hand some more at the delectably simple roguelite minigame. Though Ghostrunner 2 falters in a few ways, like its more open-ended sections and superfluous wingsuit, what remains in the hours outside of those missteps is its best-in-class parkour action. And like its predecessor, it remains a damn treat. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

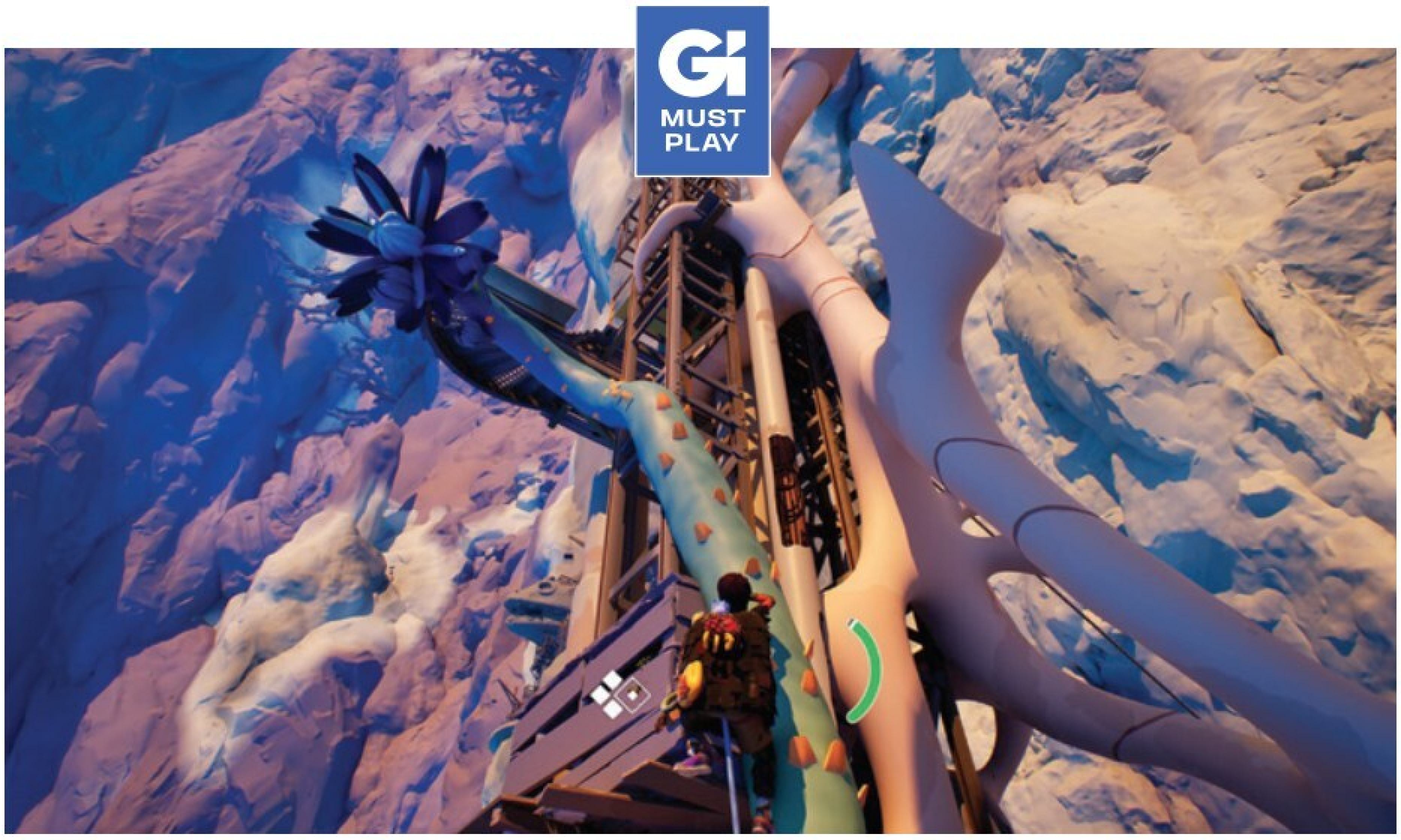
8.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER 505 Games **DEVELOPER** One More Level **RELEASE** October 26 **RATING** M

JUSANT

Reaching the summit

GI MUST PLAY



Jusant asks players to do one thing: climb. As a silent mountaineer accompanied by a cute critter, the only thing standing between you and your mysterious mission is one very tall mountain. The journey to its summit is treacherous, but thanks to an ingenious climbing system, beautiful art direction, and intriguing world-building, inching toward the top is worth the effort.

The intuitive climbing mechanics are the star of the show. Pressing the left and right shoulder buttons lets you grip handholds with the corresponding hands of the climber while you aim with the left stick. The back-and-forth rhythm of hitting both buttons to pull yourself up precarious terrain feels natural and realistic without being cumbersome. Gripping drains a stamina meter, and though managing this isn't often difficult, it does add a nice element of thoughtfulness and tension to the ascent. Climbing excels, but simply walking can be troublesome as the character has a habit of getting stuck on geometry, resulting in awkward jumping and spinning to break loose.

A retractable climbing rope automatically anchors you to a wall, meaning you can never fall to your death (or die in general). While this contributes to the game's relaxed, meditative atmosphere, that doesn't mean failure isn't a factor. Slipping sends you dangling back to where you began, which can result in having to reclimb lengthy stretches. You can prevent demoralizing setbacks by staking up to three pitons as you climb, extending your reach while creating makeshift checkpoints.

I love the strategy of managing the placement of my pitons, as it gave me creative agency in how I navigated tricky sections – namely walls lacking handholds – while ensuring any lost progress was entirely my fault due to bad or infrequent piton staking. The rope also allows for performing fun maneuvers like swinging across gaps or wall-running. Ballast, the climber's cute, water-like pet, offers a helping hand by emitting pulses that make giant flower bulbs sprout climbable buds or grow scalable vines. These tricks and more complement traditional climbing while adding an entertaining layer of whimsy.

Developer Don't Nod does a great job of mixing up Jusant's premise by introducing new environmental or platforming challenges in each of the game's six chapters. One section has you riding powerful wind gusts to reach far-off platforms. Rock-like bugs serve as moving handholds that can carry the player along. One of my favorite areas lets you scale and swing across massive stalactites in a giant, bioilluminated cave. Jusant has a relatively short run time, but it remains fresh and engaging throughout.

Jusant's picturesque scenery looks fantastic thanks to its warm colors, great lighting, and sharp art design. Set in a world that has mysteriously lost nearly all traces of water, the mountain is situated in a dry, vast seabed. Numerous paths inside and outside the mountain hide fascinating diaries, collectibles, and interactive artifacts, such as wall paintings telling a grand legend and seashells that provide audio-only flashbacks of this lost civilization. Even if you can't collect it, I was happy to find new rooms and stores to get a better idea of these people's way of life.

Jusant is my favorite Don't Nod title since the original Life is Strange, and one of the year's best gems. The climbing mechanics are so smart and well-executed that I hope other games take notes. Add an inviting presentation, a pleasant soundtrack, and an alluring air of mystery and isolation reminiscent of Team Ico's best works, and Jusant is a rewarding expedition. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

9

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Don't Nod **DEVELOPER** Don't Nod
RELEASE October 31 **RATING** E

LIKE A DRAGON GAIDEN: THE MAN WHO ERASED HIS NAME

A boy named Joryu

As far as pitches go, Like a Dragon Gaiden: The Man Who Erased His Name, the next game in what used to be called the Yakuza series, is hard to beat: Find out what happened to series protagonist Kiryu Kazuma between Yakuza 6: The Song of Life and Yakuza: Like a Dragon. The former ended with Kiryu faking his death to keep his adopted family of orphans safe. Until the latter, when he showed back up. For the most part, Gaiden is an interesting bridge between those two games – even if it doesn't always go as deep into Kiryu's character as I might've hoped.

Following the events of Yakuza 6, Kiryu, now called Joryu, made a deal with the Daidoji, a secret organization with its hands seemingly in every part of Japan – from the underworld to the upper echelons of the government. Because the Daidoji helped stage Kiryu's death, he's now the group's errand boy. Until he gets involved in a hodgepodge of various conspiracies that ultimately lead to him helping disband the Omi and Tojo yakuza groups.

Gaiden's story is very well-told and gripping. I like the noir slant on what is often fantastical crime dramas, and Daidoji's role in Japan makes it easy to buy into the plot's more spectacular moments. And I especially like the way the back third of the game mixes in with Like a Dragon. Hilariously, though, despite going to great pains to remind the player over and over that Kiryu is dead, just about everyone sees through his disguise; no one buys this Joryu front.

Where the story falters is being a satisfying bridge between Yakuza 6 and Like a Dragon. On one hand, I now know what Kiryu was up to. On the other hand, the reason he faked his death often feels like an afterthought. We don't get a ton of time to examine the psychological impacts his staged death has had on him as a character. That is until the ending, which is one of the best and most affecting in the entire series, but it would've been nice to see more of that paid off throughout the game rather than backloaded.

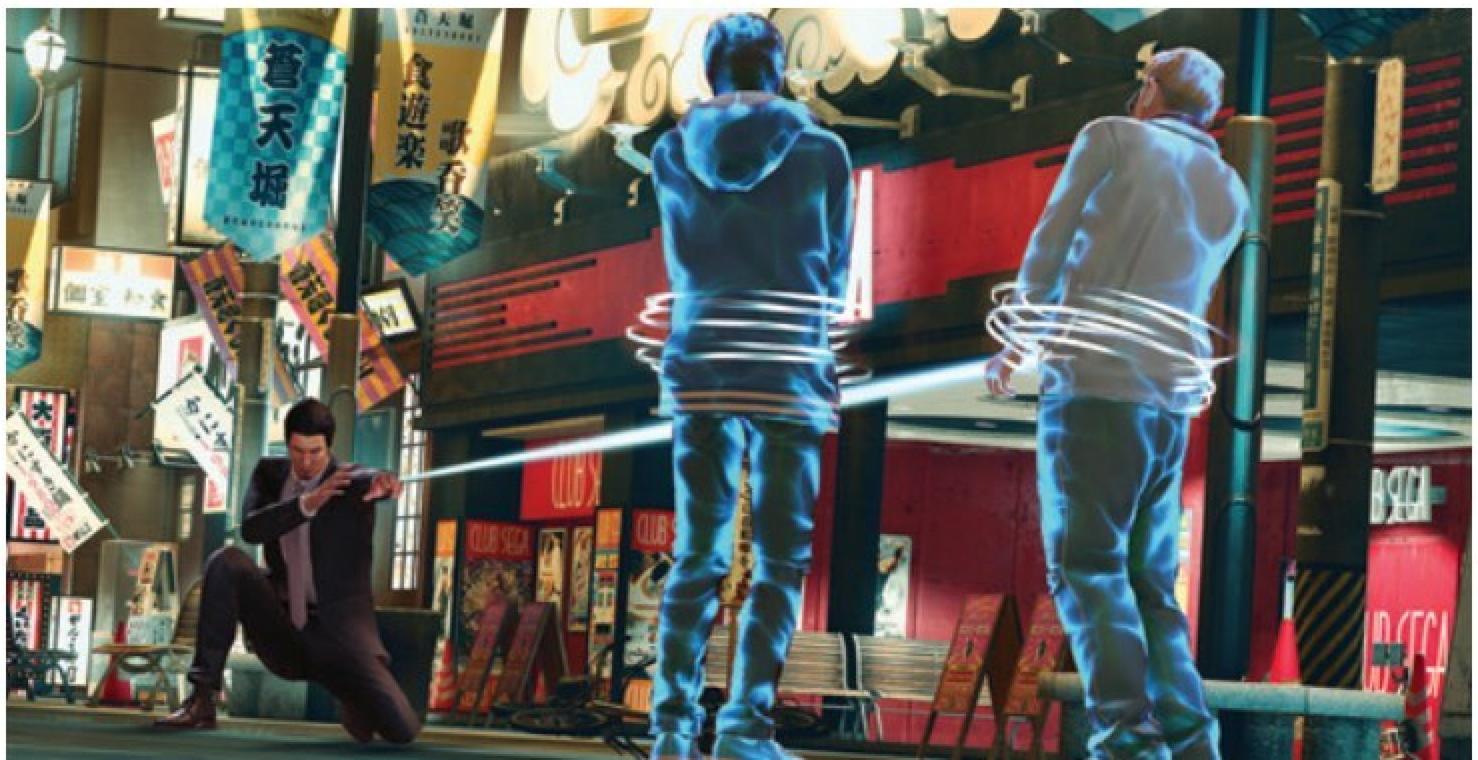
Gaiden returns to the series' trademark brawler combat, and it has satisfying twists on the formula in line with Kiryu's new job. There are two fighting styles: Yakuza and Agent. Yakuza plays similarly to other RGG games – you punch, kick, and beat up anything in your way. Agent is a faster but weaker combat stance, but with the addition of cool spy tools. – including an exploding cigarette, drones, and a cord that can tie up enemies. I like swapping between the two fighting styles. For example, starting with the Agent style to tie up and throw enemies around was great for crowd control and building up my special meter to unleash heavy attacks. After thinning the herd, I'd often switch to the Yakuza style to focus my powerful attacks on stronger enemies. It's a layer of strategy I don't feel like many other RGG games have had, which are often fun but mindless.

At only 14 to 15 hours, Gaiden is a fun, comparatively short return to the world of Kiryu "Joryu" Kazuma. By the time credits roll, Gaiden neatly establishes Kiryu's role in the next mainline game, Like a Dragon: Infinite Wealth, and since that game's out in a few months, the brief taste gave me plenty to be excited for. I wish the story were more interested in exploring who Kiryu is now that he's forced into this double life, but as a thin bridge between games, Gaiden is a neat one. And I'll always appreciate an excuse to hit the streets and the thugs therein with my favorite dummy.

BY BLAKE HESTER

8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Sega **DEVELOPER** Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio **RELEASE** November 8 **RATING** M



CITIES: SKYLINES II

Utopian thinking

In the technical world of city-builders, 2015's Cities: Skylines made a name for itself as an uncompromising but delicate game where players needed to spin a variety of municipal plates to keep things in order across their fantasy cities. Eight years and millions of digital building permits later, Colossal Order has returned to construct a convincing sequel in Cities: Skylines II. The iterative additions don't arrive without consequential imperfections, but Cities: Skylines II still boasts all the intricacy and customizability necessary to provide players with a challenging and deep city-building experience.

In Cities: Skylines II, you create a whole world from terrarium beginnings. You start by zoning your districts, then adding functionality with electricity and plumbing before building serviceable districts to attract and placate dedicated citizens. I unintentionally recreated the town I grew up in, shoving all the industrial features to the side with the power and water facilities.

Despite its sandbox impression, Cities: Skylines II has an engaging progression system, offering rewards as you scale from a tiny village into a bustling megalopolis. Each milestone achieved delivers Development Points you can use in infrastructure trees to unlock systems like police and parks, while expansion permits let you extend your city limits and access the resources you need to keep the lights on. Despite how mundane it sounds, unlocking and investing in underground parking and figuring out how it could help my citizens felt revelatory thanks to this guided approach.

As my city became more complex, it opened the door to signature buildings like factories or mansions and more contemporary concerns like pollution and congestion, emboldening me to find Arcadian solutions and give my citizens a better life. Even in success, the locals had plenty to say about it via the in-game Twitter clone Chirper. Just like real social media, there was a mountain of mean things to read about my supposedly terrible choices, with a few compliments smattered in between. How dare I try and use green energy to power the city; it's far too loud now. It forces you to come to terms with the fact that not every digital person will enjoy your utopian vision.

The exponential growth of my cities took a toll on the game's visuals and performance – Cities: Skylines II struggles to keep up with its own ambitious scale. Up close, there are moments of peculiar beauty, where sunlight streams through the gaps of a castle's battlements, or you catch the shadow cast by your own terraformed mountain. However, from the typical top-down perspective, the world feels flat and somewhat cold, not helped by the systemic chugging, error messages, and frequent crashing, which scuppered pockets of my playtime. While I hope these issues will be resolved for players post-launch, it was disappointing and frustrating to contend with while fine-tuning my pipes, wires, and bus routes.

You can zoom in and get attached to the individuals living in your city, clicking on them to learn about their education, family, pets, and socioeconomic status. At one point, I considered demolishing a whole suburb before I spotted one of my uncanny valley citizens doing yoga in the backyard. After reading their factfile, I couldn't bring myself to destroy their family home.

If you miss too many citizen complaints, you're alerted of major problems via booming emergency warnings that disrupt Cities: Skylines II's calming Brian Eno-esque soundtrack, which is punctuated by appropriately annoying fictional ads. Environmental tragedies constitute hard urban planning lessons, and you're able to manage traffic control, bunkers, and firefighters to mitigate damage. The first time I witnessed a tornado, it skirted my city's edges, and I held my breath, praying it wouldn't reach the center, promptly investing in better protection after the fact.

Quantifying the nuance of Cities: Skylines II isn't easy. As I dig deeper into its complicated systems, more and more exciting features are still coming into focus. The sequel is ambitious and wants players to juggle hundreds of considerations as they build towards Elysium, and it delivers in that aspect. Yet, unfortunately, the game's consistent technical problems tend to mire that calculated success. **BY SARAH THWAITES**

7.5

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation
PUBLISHER Paradox Interactive **DEVELOPER** Colossal Order
RELEASE October 24 **RATING** E

LORDS OF THE FALLEN

When I rolled credits on Lords of the Fallen, I felt no joy aside from being happy I was done, which is a shame because its first half left me excited for what was yet to come. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

6

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action/Role-Playing (3-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** CI Games
DEVELOPER Hexworks
RELEASE October 12 **RATING** M

RESIDENT EVIL 4: SEPARATE WAYS

The DLC lets players see the story from a new perspective, fill in some narrative gaps, learn more about Ada and Wesker, and offers new mechanics. But it mostly functions as a reminder that the Resident Evil 4 remake is a very, very good video game. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

8.75

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Capcom **DEVELOPER** Capcom
RELEASE September 21 **RATING** M

DETECTIVE PIKACHU RETURNS

Your mind won't be changed if the style of the previous game wasn't for you, but patient gumshoes should be satisfied with a capable follow-up. **BY BRYAN VORE**

7.25

PLATFORM Switch
STYLE 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Nintendo, The Pokémon Company
DEVELOPER Creatures
RELEASE October 6 **RATING** E

PAYDAY 3

Payday 3's eight heists are as challenging as they are entertaining; the inevitable shootouts with the cops are frantic and fun, and the redefined objectives make onboarding newer players easier than ever. **BY KENNETH SEWARD JR.**

8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Shooter (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Deep Silver
DEVELOPER Starbreeze Studio
RELEASE September 21 **RATING** M

HOT WHEELS UNLEASHED 2: TURBOCHARGED

As a speed-focused arcade racer, Hot Wheels Unleashed 2: Turbocharged is a joy thanks to the emphasis on going fast, collecting Hot Wheels cars spanning decades, and crafting your own tracks.

BY LOUIS LIVINGSTON-GARCIA

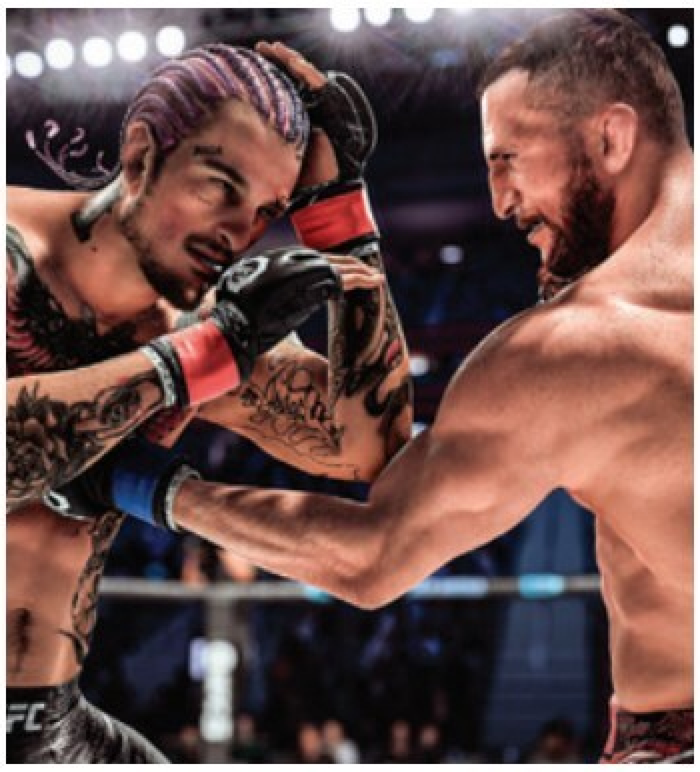
7.75

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 or 2-Player Racing (12-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Milestone S.r.l. **DEVELOPER** Milestone S.r.l.
RELEASE October 18 **RATING** E

EA SPORTS UFC 5

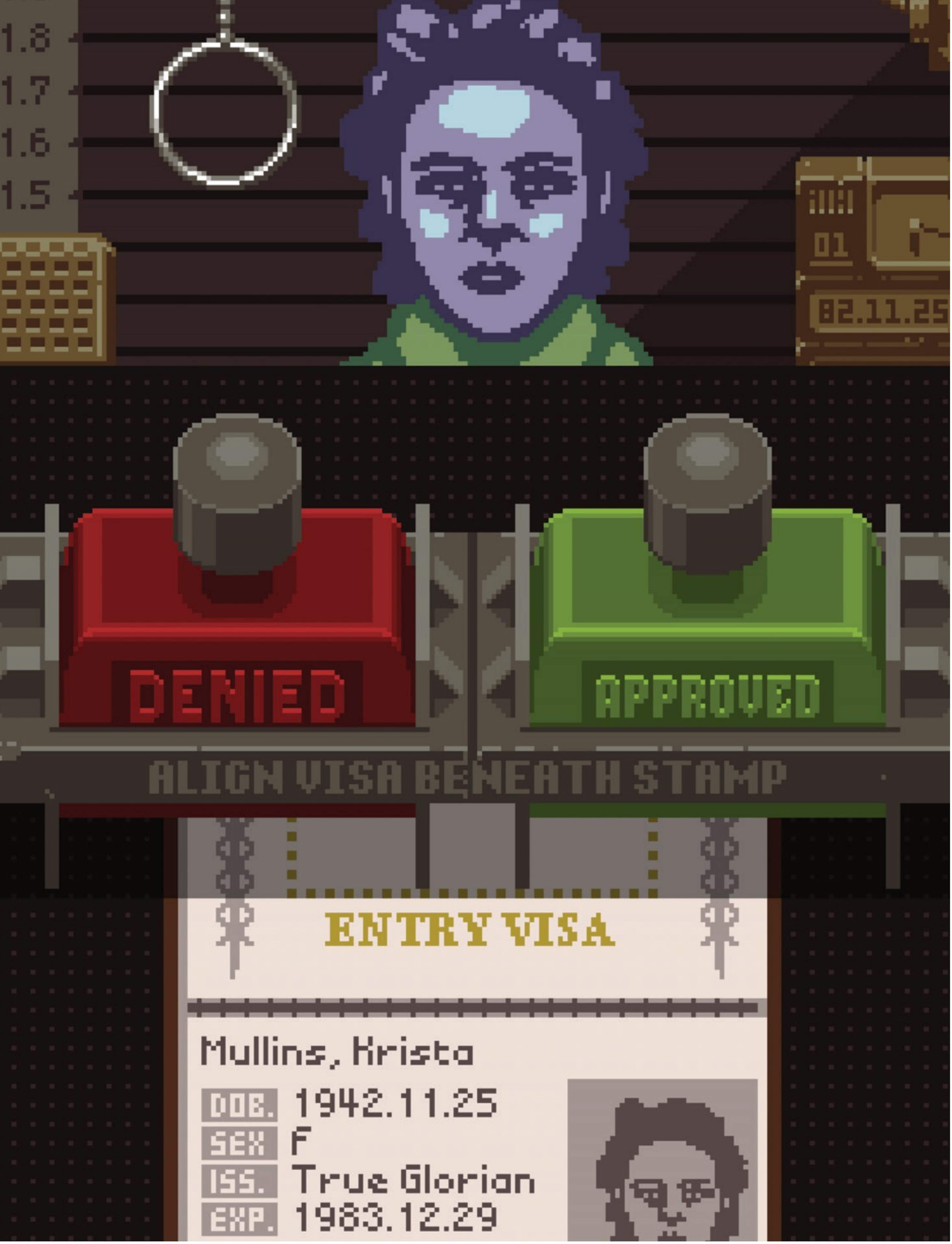
Even with its shortcomings, EA Sports UFC 5 delivers an exciting MMA experience regardless of the mode in which you compete.

BY BRIAN SHEA ■



8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
STYLE 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online)
PUBLISHER EA Sports
DEVELOPER EA Vancouver
RELEASE October 27 **RATING** M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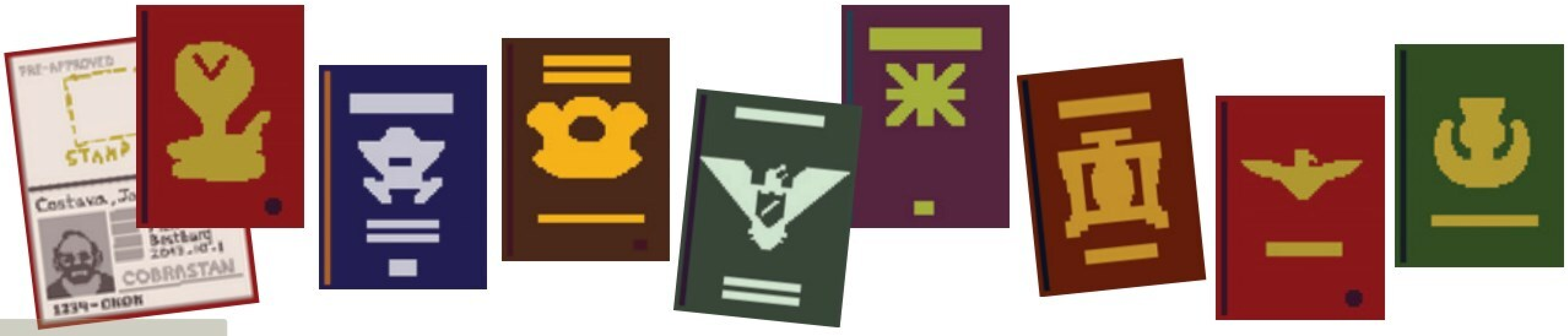
An Impenetrable Cage of Bureaucracy

A decade later, Papers, Please's view of migration is as relevant as ever

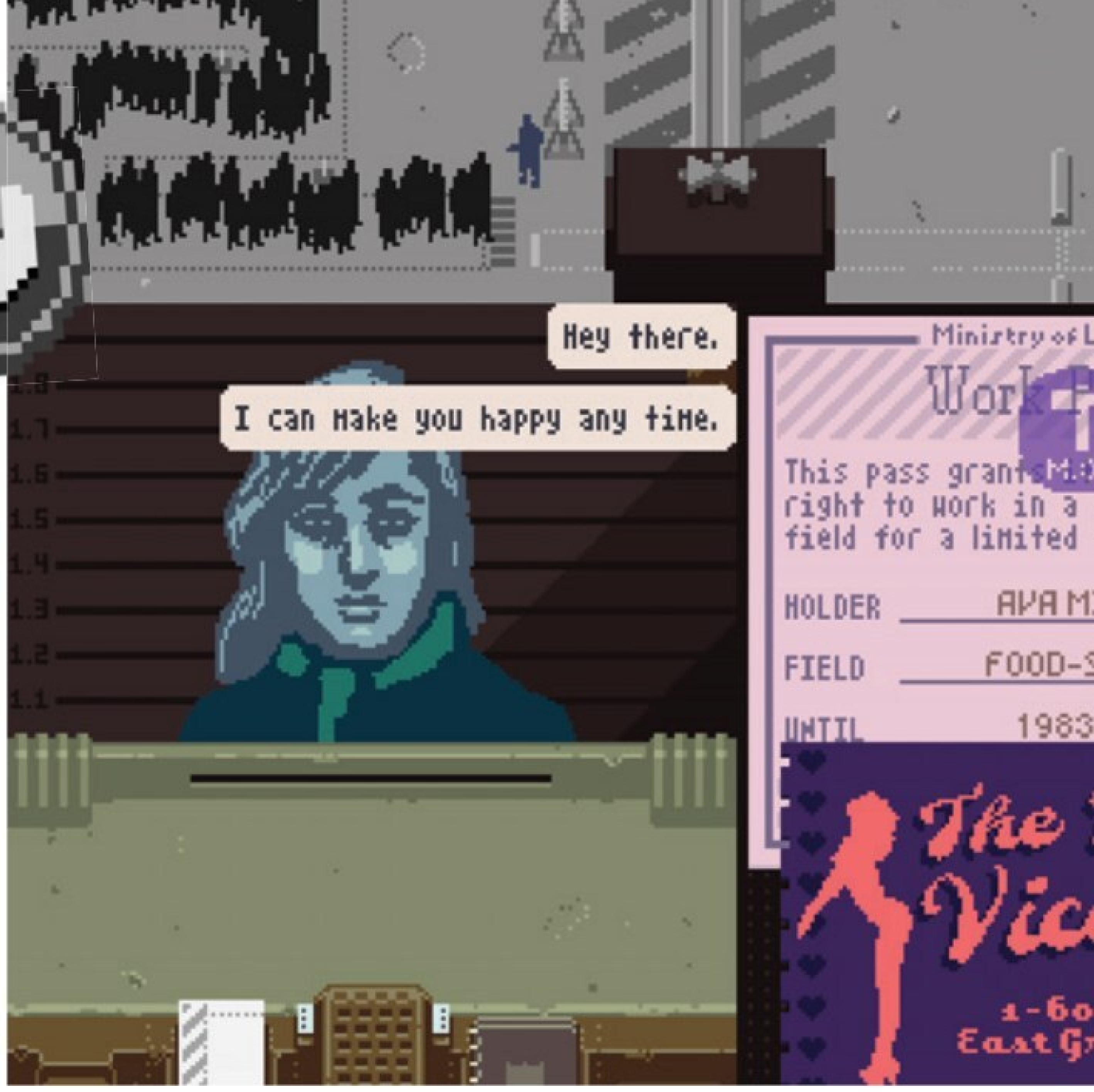
BY LUIS AGUASVIVAS



Before we read and wrote, we moved. Stories of people moving – migrating – have been told since time immemorial. The Mexica journey to central Mexico; Moses leading the Jewish people across the desert; the founding of Rome – as told by Virgil – by those that fled the fall of Troy. Unsurprisingly, then, video games also tell stories of migration. On August 8, 2013, game designer Lucas Pope, the man behind the studio 3909, released Papers, Please, a game about managing migration.

Papers, Please, subtitled "A Dystopian Document Thriller," was for some the first time they played a game whose core design ethos challenged their worldviews and understanding. Other games have placed the topic of migration front and center. Path Out (Causa Creations, 2014), an adventure game that retells the journey of Abdullah Karam, a young Syrian artist who escapes the country's decade-long civil war in 2014; and Escape from Woomera (2003), a game about a refugee, Mustafa, stuck in the infamous Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre in South Australia, are two stand-outs. Papers, Please tackles the subject from a different perspective. You play an inspector examining documents, determining whether a person can enter the fictional country of Arstotzka.

A decade after its release, the bureaucratic nightmare in Papers, Please is an increasing reality for many around the world. We see this on the news: anguished faces looking for prospects either fleeing war, environmental catastrophe, or lack of economic and social opportunities. According to the Migration Policy Institute, at the end of 2022, over 100 million people were displaced globally. Along with revisiting Papers, Please, I interviewed Pope for his perspective on the game 10 years on. I also talked to former United States diplomat Josef Burton, who worked in several consulates and embassies around the world processing visa applications, for his thoughts on the game.



Hey there.

I can make you happy any time.

Ministry of L

Work P

This pass grants
right to work in a
field for a limited

HOLDER AVA M

FIELD FOOD-S

UNTIL 1983

PAPERS, PLEASE IS AN ODD COMMERCIAL SUCCESS. According to Pope, the indie game sold over five million copies across all platforms between August 8, 2013 and August 8, 2023. It also received numerous awards and acclaim from players and critics alike. It's one of only 36 video games in the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection, alongside Tetris, Street Fighter II, and Portal. Pope feels he owes his career to the game. "It's hard to look back and be anything but proud of it," he says. "It's not perfect, and maintaining it for 10 years gave me a good look at that, but I still consider it my best work so far." High praise considering Pope also released the critically acclaimed Return of the Obra Dinn in 2018.

The game's visuals and themes are heavily influenced by the last decade of the Cold War. Its story shares much in common with the books of John le Carré, where spies – really just bureaucrats – are placed in impossible situations within geo-political struggles with grand implications. Most don't survive. If they do, the price paid for completing their work is often too high. The same is true of The Inspector in Papers, Please. The game turns the player into a villain or anti-hero.

At the beginning of the game, progress depends on how well you follow a handbook of rules and regulations created by Arstotzka's Ministry of Admission. As you play, the work of Custom and Border Protection officials stops being an abstraction. Players must protect the border and not allow those unauthorized by the Arstotzka's Ministry of Admission to enter; thus, you make cold and crucial determinations about people's futures. This sort of determination is made every day across borders all over the real world.

Migration stories are enthralling. Migrants, refugees, and asylees – in the sincerest sense of the word – the first entrepreneurs. Papers, Please is an important game because it contextualizes the broader issues relating to migration enforcement in a visceral and tangible way. The point is not to moralize but to tell a story via interactive means. Players who can stomach playing as the inspector get a view of Pope's vision of a dystopian altered reality inspired by former Communist Bloc nations.

Burton has mixed feelings about the game and its portrayal of immigration control. "The fantasy of Papers, Please is brutal because you're this inhuman bureaucrat," he says. "There's this plotting, droning music [...] and there is this dystopic kind of feeling like in the first level of Half-Life 2. You're like, 'No, absolutely not! Let's examine your papers. You don't have enough papers.' I think that we've departed from that. What I would take away from my time at the State Department, in the Foreign Service, and in Consular Affairs is that it's much more insidious than you would think. In seven and a half years, I only caught one person based on just documents. And that case was a really sloppy attempt at identity theft."

Pope does not claim that Papers, Please represents the complexities of international immigration policy "in anything other than a vastly simplified way." Ultimately, he chose to highlight "some of the bigger talking points, and there are hints of real-world associations, but to keep things flexible, I figured it was best to not follow reality too closely."

Looking back, Pope adds, "When I made the game in 2013, immigration as a topic was in the news but felt to me like an issue that had made some recent progress and was on track to get better. Unfortunately, that was all an illusion – the situation for immigrants and refugees has only gotten worse since then. In a perfect world, the game would've fallen out of relevance immediately, and we wouldn't be talking about it anymore."

1982.11.23
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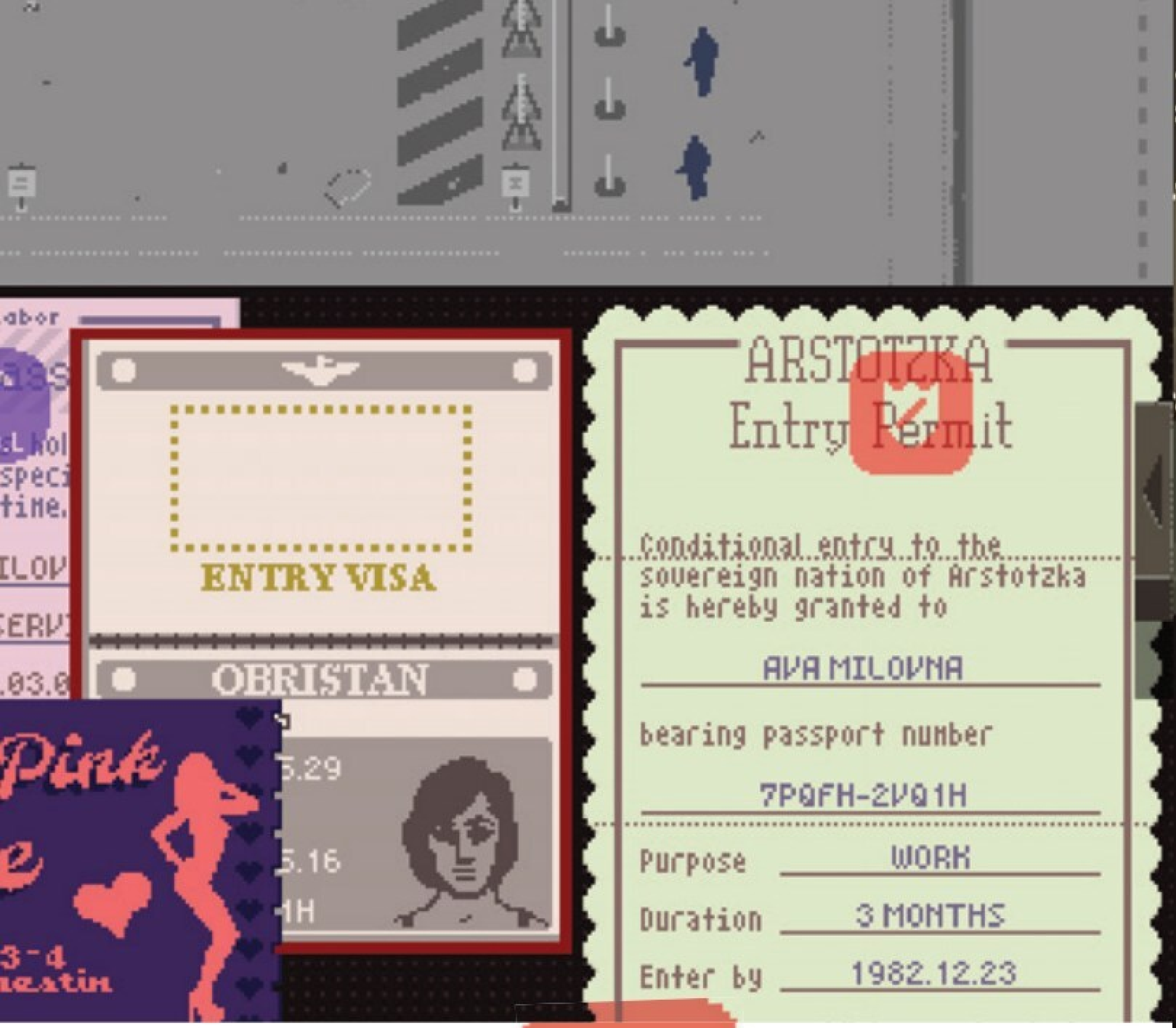
ENTRY VISA



ARSTOTZKA
Entry Permit

Conditional entry to the sovereign nation of Arstotzka is hereby granted to

AVA MILOVNA

bearing passport number

7PQFH-2VQ1H

Purpose WORK

Duration 3 MONTHS

Enter by 1982.12.23

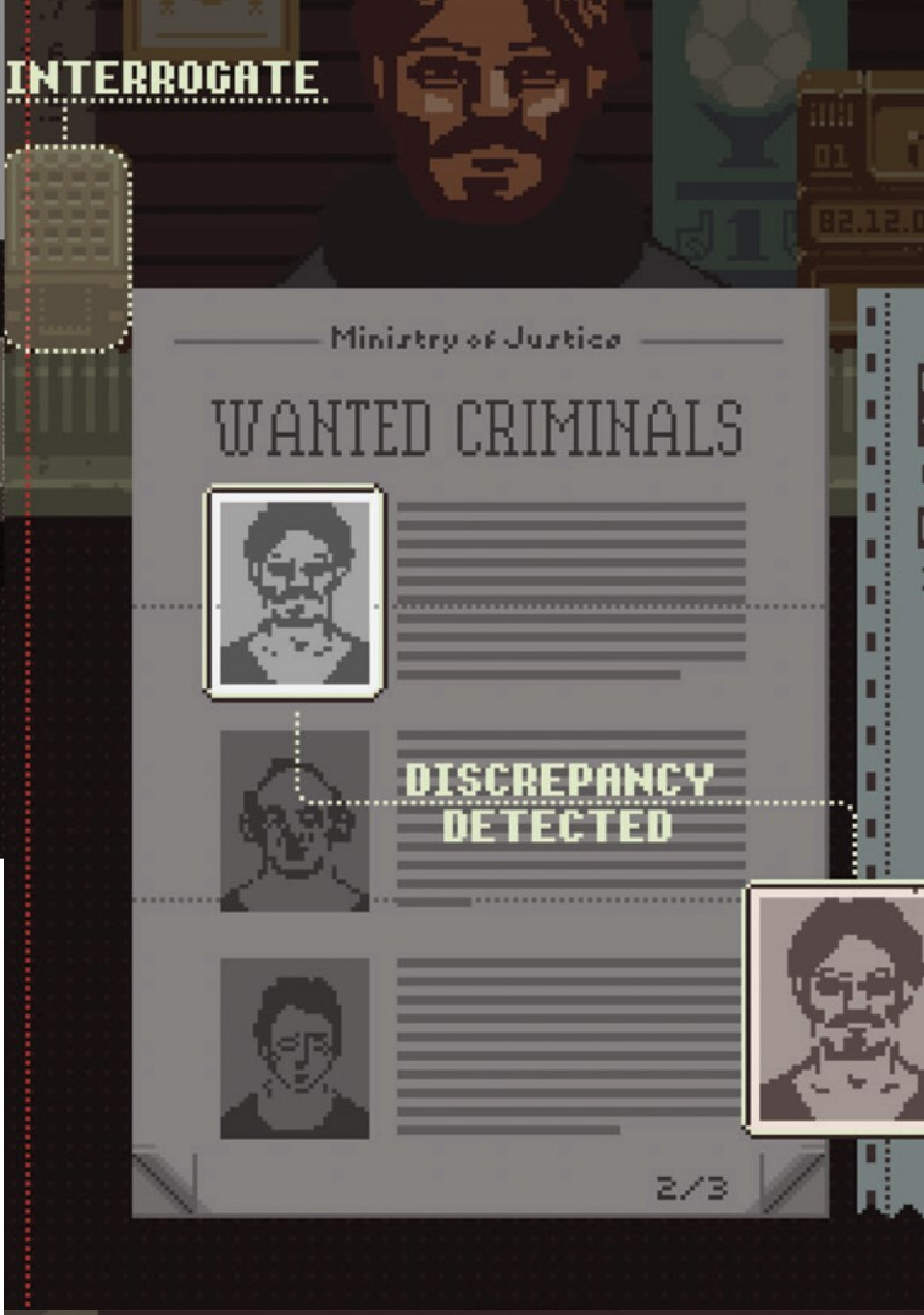
PAPERS, PLEASE IS A COLD WAR TALE. When I first played the game, the opening lyrics of Yellow Magic Orchestra's song "Ballet" played in my head. "Turning faded pages...She was a refugee from across the wall. Acting out a story written in Air." You turn a lot of paper in the game. You also can't help but make up stories about each person who appears at your window to present their passports and other documents.

For Pope, the entire premise was "...mostly inspired by the mechanical side of the game's design. Just moving the papers around was fun for me personally, and so I did my best to build on that. What kinds of things would a resource-limited border inspector see? How would they be expected to react? How can these activities be turned into interesting things for the player to do? The concept and setting were enough to keep the ideas coming until I felt like I had a whole game."

The earnestness of Papers, Please, overwhelms players. Waiting in line to be interviewed by an immigration official brings with it a feeling of uncertainty, maybe even insecurity. Readers of the German sociologist Max Weber might be familiar with how bureaucracy is dehumanizing by design. It must be impersonal to function at a large scale. Welcome to the machine. Pope doesn't take this aspect of the system for granted.

Papers, Please forces players to make unethical decisions. I asked Pope what the gameplay loop at the heart of the game says about migration and border control. He responded, "Something I tried to capture in the game is the dehumanizing aspect of bureaucracy. I think border control is a good example of how rules made in one place in response to a political issue really look when they reach the actual people that enforce them and the people that are affected by them. Those bureaucracy-driven elements were convenient for the design too, where rules can change from day to day arbitrarily to ratchet up the pressure or direct the story."

Oh, and how they change!



Ministry of Justice

WANTED CRIMINALS

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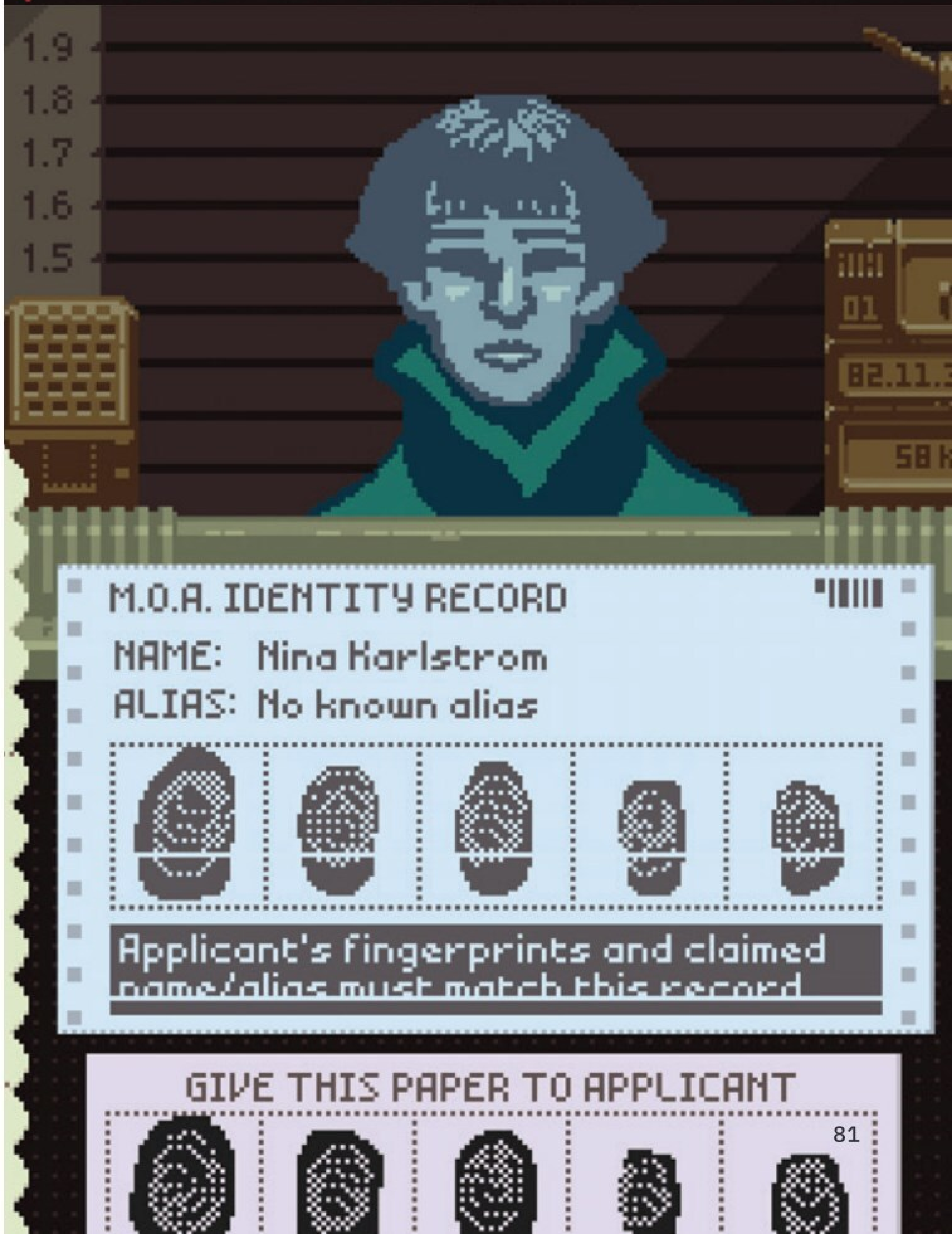

M.O.A. IDENTITY RECORD

NAME: Nina Karlstrom

ALIAS: No known alias

Applicant's fingerprints and claimed name/alias must match this record

GIVE THIS PAPER TO APPLICANT

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The narrative design and gameplay in Papers, Please are at the zeitgeist of an epoch-defining trend: mass migration and increased border enforcement. The decade following Papers, Please has had a whirlwind of immigration policy changes and practices worldwide. Just this year alone in the United States, we witnessed the end of Title 42 (pandemic-era immigration restrictions in the United States), a backlog of over one million asylum applications as of May 2023, overworked staff, and a sharp increase in student visa denials. Globally, people are leaving their homes. Spurred by large-scale armed conflicts, economic devastation, climate change, and the hope of opportunity, rationally, people migrate. We haven't seen migration at this scale since the Second World War. Imagine being the inspector in Papers, Please and processing immigration claims by people on the Southern border of the United States or in Eastern Europe processing Ukrainian refugees at the Polish border.

Pope spoke about players telling him "...that the game reflected their experience immigrating from one place to another and the complications they faced. All horror stories, basically." The bureaucratic work players are tasked with in Papers, Please is not dissimilar from that performed by Customs and Border Patrol, specifically before the creation of the Asylum Corps (a cadre of officers trained to review and adjudicate domestic refugee processing) in 1991. In its inception, the Asylum Corps was predominantly composed of individuals trained in immigration law. Before the Asylum Corps' creation, it was the job of border inspectors to adjudicate asylum claims on top of their other duties. Asylees are the ones who would fall under the purview of the inspector in Papers, Please, as these individuals have to present themselves at a legal port of entry and state their claim to asylum.

Papers, Please gamifies the process of policing migration. Yet, one key distinction between migration processing in Papers, Please, and our contemporary world is how borders now operate as extended zones, often outside the specific national border itself. Burton shared his insights on this matter. "Borders as a larger expanded geographical defuse area is a super recent phenomenon," he says. "We are talking about 15 to 20 years ago. For example, the U.S. Customs and Board Agency starts functioning as far south as Peru. The U.S. border really starts at the Guatemala-Mexico border. The border with Europe starts in Mali, in Niger, in Burkina Faso, and moves through to the Mediterranean by the time you need border officials."

As previously noted by Pope, this and other trends and procedures relating to migration are not covered by Papers, Please. The game offers an overly simplified version of migration control, both to the game's benefit and to its detriment. It is not a complete or accurate depiction of the lived

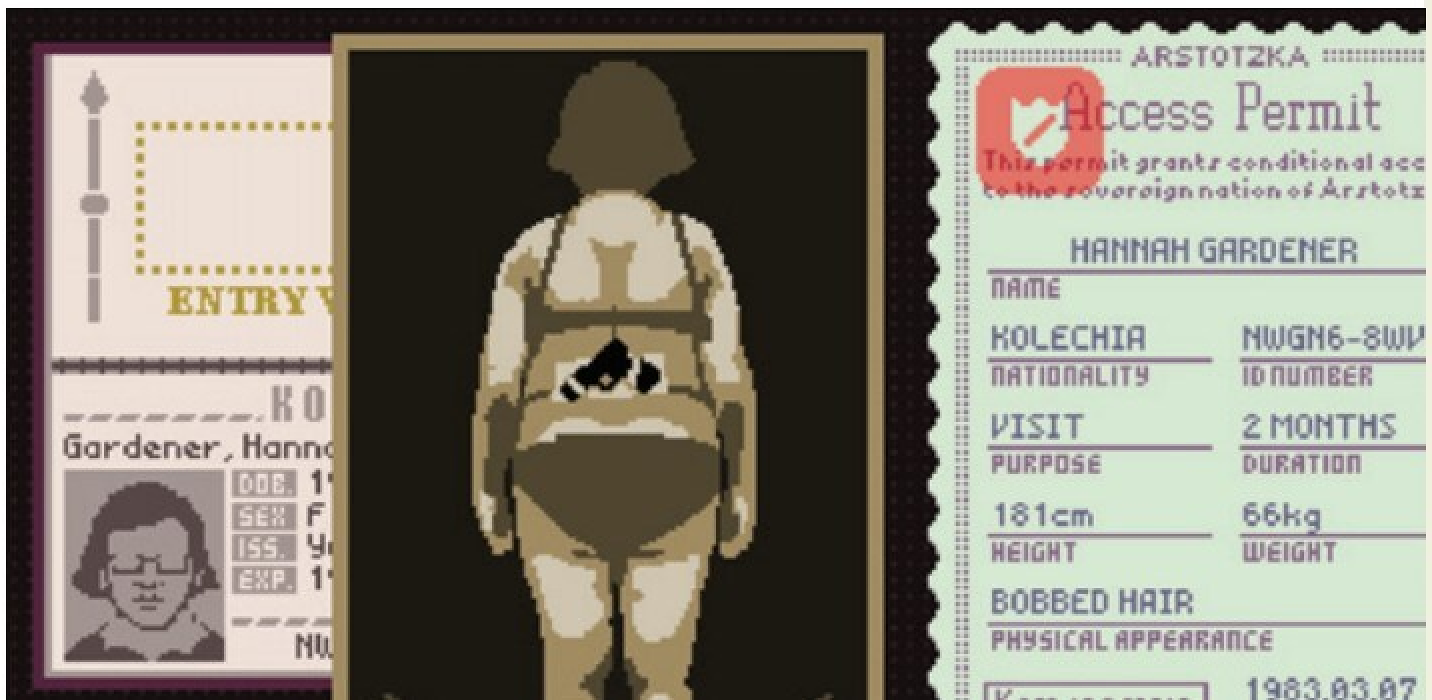
The Truth o

November

Grestin Border Checkpoint O

After 6 Long Years. Can the Ministry of A
Safe?

Families To Reunite



ENTRY V

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NW

ARSTOTZKA

Access Permit

This permit grants conditional acc
to the sovereign nation of Arstotz

HANNAH GARDENER
NAME

KOLECHIA
NATIONALITY

NWGN6-8WV
ID NUMBER

VISIT
PURPOSE

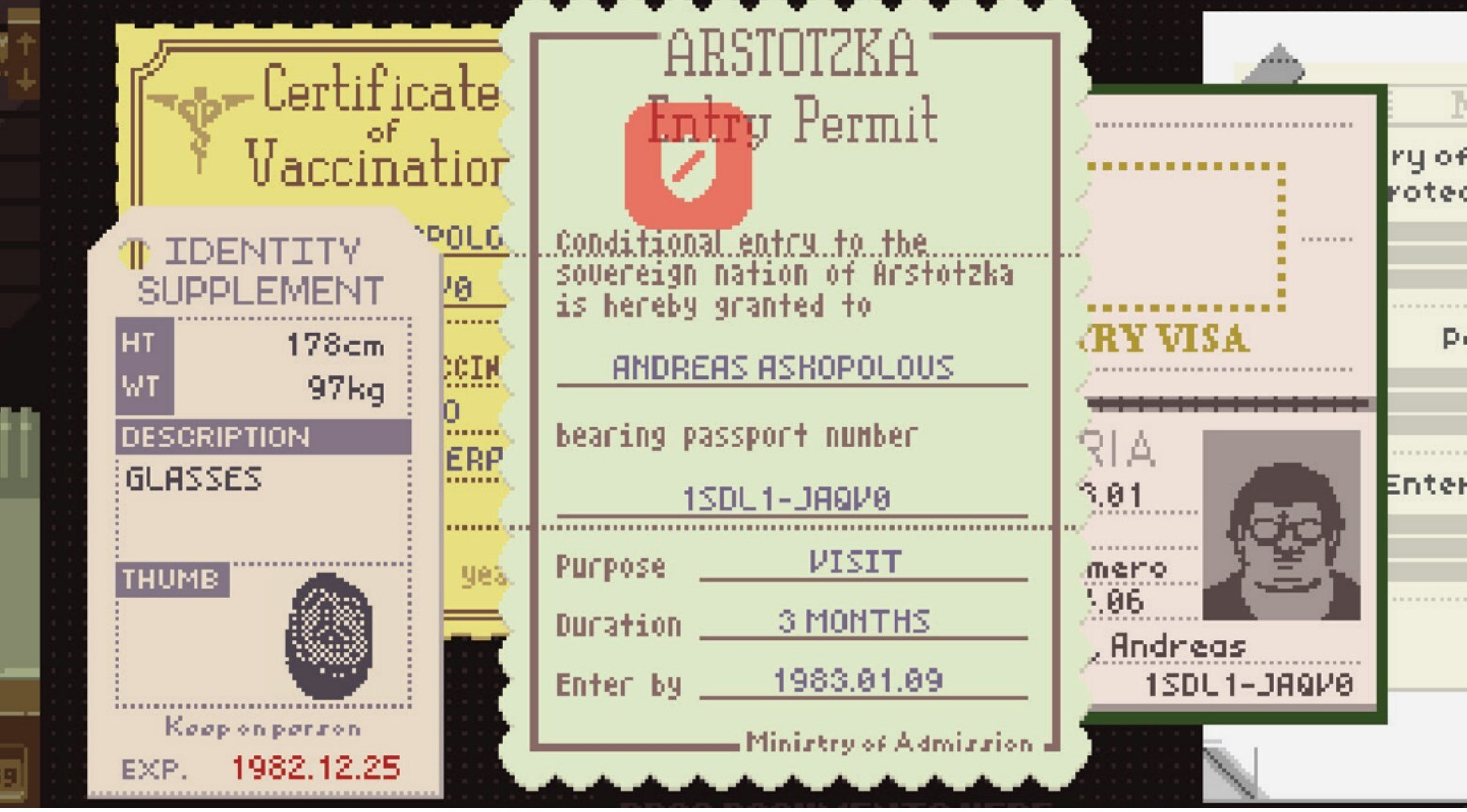
2 MONTHS
DURATION

181cm
HEIGHT

66kg
WEIGHT

BOBBED HAIR
PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

1983.03.07



Certificate of Vaccination

IDENTITY SUPPLEMENT

HT 178cm

WT 97kg

DESCRIPTION

GLASSES

THUMB

Keep on person

EXP. 1982.12.25

ARSTOTZKA

Entry Permit

Conditional entry to the sovereign nation of Arstotzka is hereby granted to

ANDREAS ASKOPOLOUS

bearing passport number

1SDL1-JAQV0

Purpose VISIT

Duration 3 MONTHS

Enter by 1983.01.09

Ministry of Admission

experiences of migrants and asylum-seekers. Also, deeply coloring its perspectives are older and now largely defunct ways in which destination countries (places where immigrants would like to ultimately reside) process migrants at their borders.

Burton sees Papers, Please as "...almost like a replay of the 20th century's ideas about borders. Which I think are shaped by, and the policy imperatives come by, the testimonies of all the people in Europe after the Second World War of the idea of being at the border and not being allowed in. Well, in the present day, you are not even going to get to the border. You already go through a period of scrutiny [before arriving at the country of destination] [...] I had a pretty unique experience where I was the guy saying 'no,' but usually as part of an extremely diffuse process. I also think that it's interesting that Papers, Please is set in an environment in what I guess you'll call 'real existing socialism.' It's clearly supposed to be in a Romania or Albania kind of analog. In a hyper isolated kind of independent eastern European communist country." These kinds of "isolated" countries are rarer today.

f Arstotzka
23rd, 1982
No Charge
pens At Last!
dmission Keep Us
Politics
Sports

PAPERS, PLEASE IS A TOWERING ACHIEVEMENT, regardless of how its mechnaics and view of migration differ from reality. Few games are as bold and interweave narrative and gameplay so succinctly. The game's themes are malleable to the specific societal context that the player brings. Routinely, it's used by academics in classrooms and continues to captivate players looking for more than just a few hours of entertainment.

A decade after its release, Papers, Please stands as a singular vision that is myopic, bleak, and unflinching. It is also riveting. The game is an example of Pope's strong belief in the power of interactive media to build empathy. According to Pope, "If Papers, Please can raise awareness about these issues, then I'm very happy. I think a fundamental problem with understanding migration is that the topic is so distant from most people's comfortable daily experience. Having the situations and challenges right up in your face, subject to your choices can hopefully encourage more empathetic ways to think about them." ■

(NEARLY) EVERY FRANCHISE MICROSOFT NOW OWNS AFTER PURCHASING ACTIVISION/BLIZZARD

AFTER A LONG, DRAWN-OUT PROCESS of lawyer-to-lawyer conversations, governmental red tape, and even a bit of failed Sony intervention, Microsoft and Xbox are now the proud parents of a pair of twins named Activision and Blizzard (see page 8 for more details). Time will tell if this is a good thing that will benefit consumers, but in the meantime, here's a far-from-comprehensive list of every franchise Microsoft can now make and publish games about ... if it so chooses.

- AlphaBetty Saga
- Blackthorne
- Blossom Blast Saga
- Bubble Witch Saga
- Call of Duty
- Candy Crush
- Crash Bandicoot
- Diablo
- Diamond Diaries Saga
- Farm Heroes Saga
- Freddy Pharkus: Frontier Pharmacist
- Gabriel Knight
- Geometry Wars
- Guitar Hero
- Gun
- Hearthstone
- Heavy Gear
- Heretic
- Hexen
- Heroes of the Storm
- Hoop de Loop Saga
- Interstate '76
- King's Quest
- Knighthood – Epic RPG Knights
- Laura Bow Mystery Series
- Legend of Solgard
- Overwatch
- Papa Pear Saga
- Paradise Bay
- Pepper Panic Saga
- Pet Rescue Saga
- Phantasmagoria
- Pitfall
- Police Quest
- Prototype
- Pyramid Solitaire Saga
- Quest for Glory
- Rebel Riders
- Scrubby Dubby Saga
- Shuffle Cats
- Singularity
- Ski Resort Tycoon
- Skylanders
- Soldier of Fortune
- Space Quest
- Spyro the Dragon
- Starcraft
- SWAT
- Tenchu
- The Lost Vikings
- Tony Hawk's Pro Skater
- True Crime
- Ultimate Soccer Manager
- Warcraft
- World of Warcraft
- Zork ■

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